



AYN RAND: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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Abstract

I pose a series of questions about Ayn Rand and her political-economic philosophy and attempt to respond to them. On most occasions my views are congruent with hers; but not on all of them. Why is it important that the views of this author be scrutinized? That is because, with her novels and non-fiction works, she had a wildly disproportionate effect on world public policy. She did more than pretty much anyone else on the planet to promote private property rights, free enterprise, and laissez-fair capitalism. Her main vehicle, her main contribution to the limited government philosophy was her 1957 book, "Atlas Shrugged" (which is still briskly selling, more than a half-century later). This novel tells the tale of the real contributors to the economy: not workers, but, rather, employers; businessmen, capitalists, inventors, and investors. We all know what happens when employees go on strike: there is vast chaos. This book is certainly the first, and perhaps, still, the only one to trace out what happens when entrepreneurs withdraw their labor. Spoiler alert: it is not pretty.

Keywords: Ayn Rand; objectivism; libertarianism; intellectual property; free enterprise; laissez-faire capitalism; the marketplace.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ayn Rand (1905-1982) was born in Saint Petersburg, Russia, and died in New York City, New York. The author of the still best-selling novel *Atlas Shrugged* (first published in 1957), she profoundly influenced politics and political economy in her adopted country. It is probably no exaggeration to say that she converted more people to the philosophy of libertarianism than any other person,¹ even though she dismissed

advocates of this view as "hippies of the right"² and instead led her group, called Objectivists.

Here are a series of questions and short answers concerning her, her career, her viewpoints, and her accomplishments.

2. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. Much of Miss Rand's³ ethical, social, and economic thinking is considered highly reactionary. Why do you think it is still valid among many thinkers?

"Reactionary" means, merely, based on the past. What is wrong with that? Mozart and Bach, my two favorite composers, are reactionary in this sense.

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¹ With the possible exception of congressman Ron Paul
² Ayn Rand Lexicon (2022)

³ She insisted upon "Miss" and adamantly rejected "Ms."



Does that mean they were poor musicians? Hardly. Just as Mozart and Bach are “still valid” this applies to the views of Ayn Rand, and other free enterprise philosophers.

In sharp contrast, virtually her polar opposites are now characterized as “progressives.” This linguistic practice only attests to the fact that leftist wokesters have to a great degree taken control of “acceptable” language. I’ll take her supposed invalid reactionary views over those of the “progressive” left liberals any day.

2. What are Rand's best contributions to philosophical and economic thought?

I am not much of a fan of her contributions to philosophy. One commentator was unkind enough to characterize them as a “knot on the tree of knowledge.”⁴ She called this perspective “Objectivism” and it all started with “A is A.” From that, she deduced all sorts of conclusions, mostly insightful, but the process left something to be desired.

However, regarding her views on economics, there is a very different and far better story. She supported laissez-faire capitalism, the last best hope for the welfare of mankind. She was radical for capitalism, defending it with verve and wisdom.

3. Ayn Rand's opinions have always been very close to the ideology of Republican politicians. Why? Do you think she has influenced Donald Trump?

Her and their views on economics are not that close, unfortunately for the latter. The Republican party supports things like the minimum wage law, tariffs, and welfare that she properly opposed. Yes, her influence is great and certainly includes Trump at least to some small degree. It cannot be denied that the Republicans are by and large closer to her views than the Democrats, but it is only a matter of (a small) degree, not kind. Yes, there are some honorable exceptions. Senator Rand Paul and Congressman Ron Paul come to mind in this regard. But by and large, the Republicans at best espouse a pale carbon copy

of her important economic insights. Well, I suppose that is better, alright, far better than the Democrats who are for the most part 180 degrees apart from her economic perspectives.

4. Many conservative politicians, including Donald Trump, defend Miss Rand's ideas. Why? What makes them so appealing?

She wrote and spoke with verve and electricity. Her economic views were those of Adam Smith, Ludwig von Mises, and Henry Hazlitt.⁵ But she could say things that would reverberate with the layman in a way that they could not. Her novel *Atlas Shrugged* was first published in 1957. It is still selling thousands of copies every year.

Would be it were more true that conservative politicians, including Donald Trump, were more aligned with her perspectives than they actually are. If this were but the case, we would now have a far better and more robust economy.

5. Rand was a thinker in permanent contradiction. She was homophobic and at the same time led a very liberal sex life for her time and even by today's "standards". How can this contradiction be explained?

I do not see a real contradiction here, at least not compared to many other people, who commit adultery and are also homophobic. Yes, the two views, actions, are contradictory from some points of view, but not all.

As to whether or not she was anti-gay, this is a very contentious issue, and I am not competent to answer it.⁶ Certainly to the degree she embraced libertarianism⁷ she would never have countenanced any law forbidding such practices between consenting adults.

6. Greed was one of her basic thoughts. To what extent has it influenced the capitalism we have lived through in the 1990s and are still living under?

Gordon Gekko, in the movie “Wall Street” opined that “Greed is good.” I think he was channeling her in this. The free enterprise system converts the supposed dross of greed into the benefits of gold,

⁴ Smith (2011), citing Goldberg

⁵ Block (2005, 2018)

⁶ I did overlap with Ayn Rand for several years. She and her for a time chief lieutenant Nathaniel Brandon personally converted me from my previous socialist position to one

embracing laissez-faire capitalism and never a disparaging word about homosexuality did I ever hear from her or any of her colleagues.

⁷ This was to a very strong degree despite her explicit rejection of this philosophy.

and Ayn Rand saw this very clearly. She wrote about it very eloquently.

7. What was Rand's view of the U.S. Corporation?

Ayn Rand (1993) was dead wrong when she wrote that large corporations were "America's most persecuted minority." She started from the correct premise that large firms were the greatest beneficiaries of laissez-faire capitalism,⁸ but then falsely deduced that therefore they ought to be the biggest supporters of this system. This was an error: many large firms benefit not from economic freedom but from protectionism from competition by the government. They full well knew on which side of their bread their butter could be found. The Public Choice School calls this "rent-seeking"⁹ and that is a far more accurate way of looking at the matter. So, no big surprise here; move along, folks, nothing to see here in this phenomenon.

However, although this can only be speculative since Miss Rand was not so unfortunate to live in the modern era, one can be pretty confident that she would have been appalled at the prospect of large-scale corporations going "woke."¹⁰ What occurred at Disney World certainly would have stuck in her craw.¹¹

8. What was her view on intellectual property and the supposed Chinese abrogation of this concept?

Here, Miss Rand's views diverge from those of mine and those of my fellow Austro-libertarians. She (1967) was a staunch supporter of intellectual property rights, such as patents and copyrights,

whereas the correct view, in my opinion, is pretty much the polar opposite.¹² China is indeed accused of riding roughshod over so-called intellectual property rights, but this indictment cannot stand, since there are no such rights.

When I steal your bicycle, you no longer have it. I now have it in my possession; I have stolen it from you. However, suppose you invent the bicycle. I see you riding around on it. I am a good copycat. I create a bike of my own, thanks to your initial idea.¹³ Yes, I "stole" the idea from you, but I did not rob you of your bicycle. You still have it in your possession.

What is the difference between the two? Between the bike and the idea of the bike, the former is scarce. Only one person can own 100% of any bicycle. But the latter is not scarce. Many people may "own" the idea of a bicycle. The entire purpose of private property rights is to determine who is the proper owner of the property. Yes, he who creates the bicycle, or the house or the car, or any other scarce item is the proper owner of it. But many people, conceivably all of us, can own, or think of, ideas such as bicycles, $2+2=4$, water is H_2O , the Pythagorean theorem, mass-energy equivalence $E=mc^2$, etc. Thus, it is impossible to "steal" any of the latter, even though, to be sure, they were all first discovered, or created, by a specific individual. Still, he is not the proper owner of any idea since ideas are not scarce.

The world is a far, far, better place due to the contribution of Ayn Rand. She was not perfect, but which of us mortals is?

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⁸ Friedman (1985) said something similar about the Jews. See also on this Frankel, 1983 and Block, 2004

⁹ For a critique of this phrase, albeit not this concept, see Block (2002)

¹⁰ Doescher (2021); Ramaswamy (2021).

¹¹ Berman and Park (2022).

¹² For a critique, specifically, of Ayn Rand's view of intellectual property, see Sandefur (2007); for a general criticism of this perspective, see

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¹³ I never would have thought of that means of conveyance.

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