

## ATLAS SHRUGGED AND THE IMPORTANCE OF DRAMATIZING OUR VALUES

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My philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute.

—Ayn Rand  
“About Ayn Rand,” *Atlas Shrugged*

I swear—by life and my love of it—that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine.

—Ayn Rand  
The Striker’s Oath, *Atlas Shrugged*

IT HAS BEEN SAID that conversion to libertarianism usually begins with Ayn Rand. Well, it did for me. I was raised in a large Roman Catholic Republican family. From this context I picked up a general grounding in natural law, capitalism, and anti-communism, however implicit and riddled with contradictions. At the age of twelve I discovered a love for heroic fiction and spent as much of my free time as possible reading it, primarily in the popular genres of science fiction, fantasy, and comic books. It was not until college that I was introduced to Ayn Rand. As an undergraduate I discovered Nietzsche, who I think helped to clear the way for Rand’s ideas. Later, a friend of mine finally convinced me to read *The Fountainhead*. I confess it took me a while to warm up to Howard Roark, but I was hooked on the ideas. Before long I was devouring all of Rand’s major works of fiction and nonfiction. As important as her philosophical essays have been to my intellectual development, it is Rand’s novels that I think are her most important work. They are as much works of philosophy as of literature, especially in the case of *Atlas Shrugged*,

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but being novels they perform the necessary and valuable function of dramatizing (our) values.

Why is it important to dramatize our values? Well, morality or ethics, Rand tells us, “is a code of values to guide man’s choices and actions—the choices and actions that determine the purpose and the course of his life. Ethics, as a science, deals with discovering and defining such a code” (1964, p. 13). While undeniably necessary, philosophical discussions generally deal with concepts and values on a very abstract level. It is all too easy to slide into the use of floating abstractions. We cannot truly be said to grasp the meaning of a concept if we cannot accurately supply at least a few concrete examples of it. What is capitalism? Productive achievement? Virtue? Love? Memorizing and blindly applying definitions is not enough for us to fully understand their meaning (Rand 1990, pp. 27–28, 42, 51). The use of examples in philosophical discussions to illustrate one’s point helps, of course, but we must be ever vigilant that we grasp the full meaning of the concepts and values we use. Moreover, it is not enough simply to *think* of our values. We need to see them embodied in the world. Sadly, there are all too few consistent, untainted examples of libertarian and Objectivist values embodied in individuals, organizations, and institutions in our society.

Ayn Rand defines art as “the selective recreation of reality according to an artist’s metaphysical value judgments.” She continues:

Man’s profound need of art lies in the fact that his cognitive faculty is conceptual, i.e., that he acquires knowledge by means of abstractions, and needs the power to bring his widest metaphysical abstractions into his immediate, perceptual awareness. Art fulfills this need: by means of a selective re-creation, it concretizes man’s fundamental view of himself and of existence. It tells man, in effect, which aspects of his experience are to be regarded as essential, significant, important. In this sense, art teaches man how to use his consciousness. It conditions or stylizes man’s consciousness by conveying to him a certain way of looking at existence. (1975, p. 45)

Explicit or implicit in this passage are three functions performed by art: metaphysical, pedagogical, and persuasive. Art performs a metaphysical function by fulfilling our need to see our values embodied in concrete form in the world. “Art is man’s metaphysical mirror; what a rational man seeks to see in that mirror is a salute” (1975, p. 39). And: “Don’t work for my happiness, my brothers—show me yours—show me that it is possible—show me your achievement—and the knowledge will give me courage for mine” (p. 171).

Art performs a pedagogical function, teaching us by concrete examples what our values are or ought to be. We can also find heroes to emulate, moral guides on how one ought to act in certain situations; for instance, by asking “What would Galt do?” Art can also be persuasive, by combining entertainment with concrete illustrations of the artist’s values, in a way that more abstract philosophical discussions and argumentation cannot be.

Art is the indispensable medium for the communication of a moral ideal. . . . This does not mean that art is a substitute for philosophical thought: without a conceptual theory of ethics, an artist would not be able successfully to concretize an image of the ideal. But without the assistance of art, ethics remains in the position of theoretical engineering: art is the model-builder. (1975, pp. 21–22)

Ayn Rand argues that “the primary focus of art is metaphysical, not ethical.”

Art is not the “handmaiden” of morality, its *basic* purpose is not to educate, to reform or to advocate anything. The concretization of a moral ideal is not a textbook on how to become one. The basic purpose of art is *not* to teach, but to *show*—to hold up to man a concretized image of his nature and his place in the universe. (1975, p. 22)

This is true, and artists who make pedagogy or persuasion their primary focus in the creation process generally find that their work suffers artistically for it. Rand rightly points out that as far as art is concerned, these functions are secondary consequences. Of course, Rand does not consider things such as morality plays and propaganda posters to be art (p. 22). In dramatizing our values, we need not always restrict ourselves to creating art in this strictest of senses.

Literature is Ayn Rand’s preferred art form. It is mine as well. “Literature re-creates reality by means of language . . .” Rand writes,

The relation of literature to man’s cognitive faculty is obvious: literature re-creates reality by means of words, i.e., concepts. But in order to re-create reality, it is the sensory-perceptual level of man’s awareness that literature has to convey conceptually: the reality of concrete, individual men and events, of specific sights, sounds, textures, etc. (1975, pp. 45–46)

In *Atlas Shrugged*, we see the moral ideal embodied in John Galt and Galt’s Gulch. We see what it means to be good and virtuous, and we see the impotence of evil. We see heroic figures overcoming difficult natural and man-made obstacles. We are treated to the greatness and thrill of productive achievement (in industry, in art, and in other areas of life), the nature and importance of capitalism, and the nature and disastrous consequences of altruism and socialism. And

all of these aspects are drawn in varied and stark detail. They are therefore made more immediately real to us than if these concepts and values were merely discussed in a philosophical essay.

*Atlas Shrugged* is a monumental and complex novel. I could not possibly do its breadth and depth justice in one short article, or even in an entire book, so I will restrict myself to discussing briefly three related aspects of it that, upon my rereading of the novel recently, had particular resonance for me. These are: heroism, personal and productive achievement, and the strike of the men of the mind.

#### ASPECTS OF A HERO

Heroism is a common element in my favorite genre fiction, especially fantasy and comics. All of the protagonists of *Atlas Shrugged* are truly heroic figures, champions of life, truth, justice, and liberty, displaying nobility of purpose, feats of courage, unflinching integrity, perseverance in the face of adversity, great skill and ability. All are quick to take initiative and responsibility while other characters in the story increasingly seek to avoid and shirk it. John Galt and Hank Rearden both started with nothing, while Dagny Taggart and Francisco D'Anconia both refused to rely upon their inheritances, preferring instead to succeed on the basis of their own ability. Rearden, Dagny, and the other industrialists struggle to produce, to excel at their chosen professions, to make good on commitments and satisfy customers, in the face of increasingly onerous government regulations and taxes. There are even a couple of fight scenes in which the protagonists display dedication to their values and martial competence, with Francisco and Ragnar Danneskjöld in particular displaying great skill. These heroic traits contribute to the great achievements of Rand's characters

#### PERSONAL AND PRODUCTIVE ACHIEVEMENT: RAND'S INFLUENCE ON SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY WRITERS

Examples of personal and productive achievement abound in *Atlas Shrugged*. Each of the protagonists struggles to understand the nature of their opponents, of evil. This struggle is dramatized in detail primarily in the characters of Dagny and Rearden. Rearden in particular begins the story with a mistaken set of premises about social morality and sex, the consequences of which he suffers from greatly and willingly, but eventually he ends the struggle by rejecting the creed of altruism and applying the moral code he adhered to in his work to the whole of his life.

The examples of productive work run the gamut from excellence at one's job or craft (music, medicine, law, banking, railroad engineer, housekeeping) to the superlatively efficient running of a business to artistic creation to scientific discovery and technological invention. There are so many technological inventions in *Atlas Shrugged* that, combined with the near-future setting (at the time of publication in 1957) and the progression through apocalyptic societal collapse to the promise of a utopian rise from the ashes, the novel has a somewhat science fictional flavor to it. The list of inventions includes: Rearden Metal, a green-blue alloy stronger, lighter and cheaper than steel (Rand 1992, p. 27); Ellis Wyatt's new process for efficiently extracting oil from oil shale (pp. 233, 660–61); Galt's motor, premised on a groundbreaking new theory of energy, that can efficiently produce electrical energy from atmospheric electricity (pp. 269–73); a camouflaging refractor ray screen (pp. 645–46); a portable x-ray machine (p. 652) and a medical procedure to prevent brain strokes (p. 676); a voice activated door lock and security system (pp. 671–72); new mining machinery (pp. 726–27); the discovery of a new radio frequency or invention of a new method and device for radio broadcasting (pp. 922–23, 1059); a powerful incinerator that would be great for trash disposal or as a security device for keeping certain things out of the wrong hands (pp. 1003–04). And, in the backstory of the book, Dr. Robert Stadler has made groundbreaking discoveries regarding cosmic rays. Tellingly, the only inventions developed under government auspices in the novel are a weapon of mass destruction, a destructive sound wave generator, dubbed Project X (for Xylophone) (pp. 753, 756, 976), and a rather sophisticated electrocuting torture device, dubbed Project F or the Ferris Persuader, which breaks down (pp. 1039, 1043–46).

There are important differences, however, between *Atlas Shrugged* and traditional genre science fiction, fantasy, and comics. One of the differences that sets *Atlas Shrugged* apart from most is that Ayn Rand gives her heroes explicitly and unashamedly self-interested motives.<sup>1</sup> Rand does not portray true heroism in an altruistic light. She does not, as so often happens, describe or explain in altruistic, sacrificial language heroic actions that the reader can tell actually had (at least implicitly) self-interested motives. Another important difference is that traditional science fiction, fantasy, or comic book heroes typically face villains of comparable or superior

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<sup>1</sup>Self-interested in the rational (or enlightened), Aristotelian sense, of course, which does not preclude concern for the welfare of others.

power and ability, whereas Rand's villains are particularly pathetic. A major theme-element in *Atlas Shrugged* is the impotence of evil. Rand's villains are only powerful and terrifying due to their sheer numbers and the sanction of their victims. In this light, the typical villains of genre fiction, as despicable as they are, are not thoroughly evil. They are still men of ability (they are not impotent); their strength derives from their virtues, which unfortunately are twisted to serve evil ends or means.

The scientific discoveries and technological inventions also serve a different function in *Atlas Shrugged* than they would in a typical science fiction novel. In science fiction their primary purpose is to create an exotic setting, to serve as a central plot device, or to explore the effects they might have on human lives, society, and culture. For Rand, the primary purpose of including them is to dramatize productive achievement—the feat of discovery or invention, and the kind of men who are capable of it. We are given some glimpses and hints as to the consequences of these discoveries and inventions, and several of them play an important role in the plot, but these are secondary considerations by comparison. Of course, there is no reason why productive achievement cannot be a major focus in genre science fiction—and sometimes it is.

Ayn Rand has had some influence within the science fiction, fantasy, and comic book genres.<sup>2</sup> Chris Matthew Sciabarra has done some good work documenting Rand's influence on popular culture. I will limit myself to highlighting only one major example each from the fantasy and science fiction genres.<sup>3</sup>

In the epic fantasy genre, there is Terry Goodkind and his best-selling *Sword of Truth* series. Goodkind publicly champions Ayn Rand's philosophy and her influence is evident in the series. In fact, this influence is increasingly apparent as the series progresses—although arguably to its detriment artistically (Goodkind's fault, not Rand's).<sup>4</sup> In an online forum on *USAToday.com*, Goodkind answered a fan's question about heroes as follows: "True heroes uphold the highest ideals of mankind. True heroes care about life and liberty.

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<sup>2</sup>Ayn Rand once remarked that such fiction "is rational" so long as it serves "some abstract purpose applicable to reality" (Rand 2000, p. 169).

<sup>3</sup>For Rand's influence in the comic book genre, see Sciabarra's "The Illustrated Rand" (2004).

<sup>4</sup>The books have been criticized for becoming increasingly too long, a fault common to epic fantasy series.

True heroes hold the truth as their highest value. True heroes stand up for what's right, despite what others do" (2003). Two of the books in the *Sword of Truth* series were finalists for the Prometheus Award, given every year by the Libertarian Futurist Society for best libertarian novel.<sup>5</sup>

In the science fiction genre, there is John C. Wright's *Golden Age* trilogy, which is set in the far future and features an ultra-minimal libertarian government.<sup>6</sup> The main protagonist, Phaethon, is named after a figure of Greek myth, but apparently drawn from Rand's reinvention of that myth in *Atlas Shrugged*. In *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand writes that the musical artist Richard Halley wrote an opera entitled *Phaëthon*, in which he "had changed the ancient Greek myth to his own purpose and meaning: Phaëthon, the young son of Helios, who stole his father's chariot and, in ambitious audacity, attempted to drive the sun across the sky, did not perish, as he perished in the myth; in Halley's opera, Phaëthon succeeded" (1992, p. 69). Near the end of the first book of the trilogy, *The Golden Age*, Phaethon is asked why he named himself after "the child of the sun god who overreached himself" and who in "his pride and folly, . . . demanded to drive his father's chariot, the sun, across the sky," but failed to control the horses. "He flew high and he flew low, burning the sky and burning the earth, till all the world cried out for Jupiter to destroy him with a lightning bolt. Why did you name yourself after this image of recklessness and pride?" Phaethon, with a smile, responds:

That I can answer. I know the truth about that myth. Phaethon did not burn the world; after all, the world is still here, is it not? No. Jupiter was afraid when he saw a mortal at the reigns of the mighty sun chariot, and felt jealous when he saw a mere man driving the divine steeds of fire. Jupiter was afraid that something might go wrong. Rather than give the youth a chance to prove himself, he shot down and killed the charioteer during takeoff. Before he ever even began to fly. What's the moral of the story? In my version, maybe the moral is that one should not let gods, or people who think they can play gods, anywhere near where the lightning bolts are kept. (Wright 2002, p. 371)

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<sup>5</sup>*Naked Empire* in 2004 and *Chainfire* in 2006, books eight and nine of the series, respectively. See the press releases on the Libertarian Futurist Society website at [www.lfs.org](http://www.lfs.org).

<sup>6</sup>Oddly, in a strange oversight, none of the books in this trilogy won the Prometheus Award; nor, to my knowledge, were any of them even finalists (or even nominated). A fantasy novel by Wright, *Mists of Everness*, which I have not read, was nominated in 2006.

The character Phaethon is a productive genius who invents and builds new technology that is deemed too dangerous by the rest of his society. In the course of the trilogy he struggles against his society and a hidden enemy to regain possession of his memories and his property. The plot and ending of the story hinge upon the impossibility of contradictions in reality, an important aspect of Aristotelian and Objectivist philosophy.

THE STRIKE OF THE MEN OF THE MIND:  
LA BOÉTIE AND JOHN GALT

When I first read *Atlas Shrugged*, I had not yet heard of Étienne de la Boétie's *Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, but upon rereading the novel for this essay I was struck by the parallel between La Boétie's call to withdraw consent from a tyrant and *Atlas's* strike. While La Boétie's analysis is limited to the subjection of nations to single tyrants, Rand broadens and deepens the analysis to the class and individual levels (at both levels it is the producer vs. the moocher and the looter). Both La Boétie and Rand identify the impotence of evil—the fact that evil ultimately depends upon the sanction of the victim.

A rather long passage from La Boétie's *Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* is worth quoting in full:

Poor, wretched, and stupid peoples, nations determined on your own misfortune and blind to your own good! You let yourselves be deprived before your own eyes of the best part of your revenues; your fields are plundered, your homes robbed, your family heirlooms taken away. You live in such a way that you cannot claim a single thing as your own; and it would seem that you consider yourselves lucky to be loaned your property, your families, and even your lives. All this havoc, this misfortune, this ruin, descends upon you not from alien foes, but from the one enemy whom you yourselves render as powerful as he is, for whom you go bravely to war, for whose greatness you do not refuse to offer your own bodies unto death. He who thus domineers over you has only two eyes, only two hands, only one body, no more than is possessed by the least man among the infinite numbers dwelling in your cities; he has indeed nothing more than the power you confer upon him to destroy you. Where has he acquired enough eyes to spy on you, if you do not provide them yourselves? How can he have so many arms to beat you with, if he does not borrow them from you? The feet that trample down your cities, where does he get them if they are not your own? How does he have any power over you except through you? How would he dare assail you if he had no cooperation from you? What could he do to you if you yourselves did not



connive with the thief who plunders you, if you were not accomplices of the murderer who kills you, if you were not traitors to yourselves? You sow your crops in order that he may ravage them, you install and furnish your homes to give him goods to pillage; you rear your daughters that he may gratify his lust; you bring up your children in order that he may confer upon them the greatest privilege he knows—to be led into his battles, to be delivered to butchery, to be made the servants of his greed and the instruments of his vengeance; you yield your bodies unto hard labor in order that he may indulge in his delights and wallow in his filthy pleasures; you weaken yourselves in order to make him the stronger and the mightier to hold you in check. From all these indignities, such as the very beasts of the field would not endure, you can deliver yourselves if you try, not by taking action, but merely by willing to be free. Resolve to serve no more, and you are at once freed. I do not ask that you place hands upon the tyrant to topple him over, but simply that you support him no longer; then you will behold him, like a great Colossus whose pedestal has been pulled away, fall of his own weight and break into pieces. (1997, pp. 52–53)

In Galt's Gulch, Galt tells Dagny that it "is the victims who made injustice possible" by accepting, however grudgingly, the creed of self-sacrifice promulgated by the incompetent despoilers of ability (Rand 1992, pp. 678–79). Earlier in the book Dagny recognizes the effect of the looter's policies on Ellis Wyatt but fails to generalize it to herself as well: "Ellis Wyatt, stripped of the right of self-defense, left without voice, without weapons, and worse: made to be the tool of his own destruction, the supporter of his own destroyers, the provider of their food and of their weapons—Ellis Wyatt being choked, with his own bright energy turned against him as the noose" (p. 312).

What Dagny also failed to realize at the time was that Wyatt *did* have at least one weapon to use against the looters: he could go on strike, withdraw his sanction, his consent. La Boétie argues that violence is not required to overthrow a single tyrant,

for he is automatically defeated if the country refuses to consent to its own enslavement: it is not necessary to deprive him of anything, but simply to give him nothing; there is no need that the country make an effort to do anything for itself provided it does nothing against itself. (1997, p. 50)

La Boétie does not urge tyrannicide or violence of any kind, though he does not explicitly disapprove of such action: rather, if the people but "cease to submit they would put an end to their servitude" (p. 50). Just as a fire requires fuel to burn or a tree nourishment to grow, so too does a tyrant. If he is simply not obeyed, he will

become “naked and undone and as nothing” (p. 51), but the more he is yielded to the stronger and more insatiable he becomes.

In *Atlas Shrugged*, when Dagny asks Galt what he has done to stop the motor of the world, Galt replies, “I have done nothing, Miss Taggart. And that’s the whole of my secret” (Rand 1992, p. 652). Of the moochers and looters, Galt later says:

Their plan—like all the plans of the royal looters of the past—is only that the loot shall last their lifetime. It has always lasted before, because in one generation they could not run out of victims. But this time—*it will not last*. The victims are on strike. We are on strike against martyrdom—and against the moral code that demands it. We are on strike against those who believe that one man must exist for the sake of another. We are on strike against the morality of cannibals, be it practiced in body or in spirit. We will not deal with men on any terms but ours—and our terms are a moral code which holds that man is an end in himself and not the means to any end of others. We do not seek to force our code upon them. They are free to believe what they please. But, for once, they will learn the meaning of their creed. That creed has lasted for centuries solely by the sanction of the victims—by means of the victim’s acceptance of punishment for breaking a code impossible to practice. But that code was intended to be broken. It is a code that thrives not on those who observe it, but on those who don’t, a morality kept in existence not by virtue of its saints, but by the grace of its sinners. We have decided not to be sinners any longer. We have ceased breaking that moral code. We shall blast it out of existence forever by the one method that it can’t withstand: by obeying it. We are obeying it. We are complying. In dealing with our fellow men, we are observing their code of values to the letter and sparing them all the evils they denounce. Is the mind evil? We have withdrawn the works of our minds from society, and not a single idea of ours is to be known or used by men. Ability is a selfish evil that leaves no chance to those who are less able? We have withdrawn from the competition and left all chances open to incompetents. This pursuit of wealth is greed, the root of all evil? We do not seek to make fortunes any longer. It is evil to earn more than one’s bare sustenance? We take nothing but the lowliest jobs and we produce, by the effort of our muscles, no more than we consume for our immediate needs—with not a penny nor inventive thought left over to harm the world. It is evil to succeed, since success is made by the strong at the expense of the weak? We have ceased burdening the weak with our ambition and have left them free to prosper without us. It is evil to be an employer? We have no employment to offer. It is evil to own property? We own nothing. It is evil to enjoy one’s existence in this world? There is no form of enjoyment that we seek from their world, and—this was hardest for us to attain—what we now feel for their world is that emotion

which they preach as an ideal: Indifference—the blank—the zero—the mark of death. . . . We are giving men everything they've professed to want and to seek as virtue for centuries. Now let them see whether they want it. (pp. 679–80)

The strike of the men of the mind is Galt's application of the following clause from the striker's oath: "I will never live for the sake of another man" (pp. 670–71). What each striker had to realize for himself was that continuing to produce despite every injustice laid upon him, even though his struggle was in the name of something he loved, meant that at least in part he was living for the sake of the looters.

If in order to have liberty nothing more is needed than to long for it, if only a simple act of the will is necessary, is there any nation in the world that considers a single wish too high a price to pay in order to recover rights which it ought to be ready to redeem at the cost of its blood, rights such that their loss must bring all men of honor to the point of feeling life to be unendurable and death itself a deliverance? (La Boétie 1997, p. 50)

What each of the strikers had to decide for himself was at what point in his context would he be truer and do more justice to his values by going on strike rather than continuing to suffer the injustices inflicted upon him and his values by parasites. Enduring the injustices, even though one has the strength to do so, only serves to encourage the moochers and looters.

Ayn Rand once wrote that "anyone who fights for the future, lives it in today" (1975, p. viii). This is especially true for the artist who simultaneously fights for the future and lives in it during the creation process by embodying his metaphysical value judgments in his art. Literature in particular plays a significant role in this fight. It serves three functions: the primary is metaphysical, and although the pedagogical and the persuasive are secondary functions, all three are important. Fiction that dramatizes our values can strengthen and revitalize our spirits, provide us with moral guides to emulate, and persuade fence-sitters.

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