

Political Philosophy

Week 9.

The Heroic Individual?
Ayn Rand's Objectivism





- Ayn Rand ‘taught me quite a bit about who I am and what my value systems are’ – Paul Ryan
- *Atlas Shrugged* ‘really had an impact on me’ – Mike Pompeo
- Sajid Javid on *The Fountainhead* : ‘It’s about the power of the individual ... About sticking up for your beliefs, against popular opinion. Being that individual that really believes in something and goes for it.’
- Which also happens to be one of Trump’s favourite books...
- ‘It relates to business, beauty, life and inner emotions. That book relates to ... Everything’
- MEP and Brexiteer Daniel Hannan has a photo of Rand on his EU desk
- Alan Greenspan, US central banker and later head of the Fed was a disciple of Rand, implementing principles from 1987 to 2008...

- ‘I am primarily the creator of a new code of morality which has so far been believed impossible – namely, a morality not based on faith, not on emotion, not on arbitrary edicts, mystical or social, but on reason.’
- ‘Man’s ‘highest moral purpose is the achievement of his own happiness, and that he must not force other people, nor accept their right to force him, that each man must live as an end in himself and follow his own rational self-interest.’

- Ayn Rand

‘The proletariat needs state power, a centralized organisation of force, an organisation of violence, both to crush the resistance of the exploiters and to *lead* the enormous mass of the population - the peasants, the petty bourgeoisie , and semi-proletarians - in the work of organising a socialist economy.’

– Lenin, *The State and Revolution*

‘In his heart every man knows quite well that, being unique, he will be in the world only once and that no imaginable chance will for a second time gather together into a unity so strangely variegated an assortment as he is: he knows it but he hides it like a bad conscience—why? From fear of his neighbour, who demands conventionality and cloaks himself with it. But what is it that constrains the individual to fear his neighbour, to think and act like a member of a herd, and to have no joy in himself? Modesty, perhaps, in a few rare cases. With the great majority it is indolence, inertia.’ - Nietzsche, “Schopenhauer as Educator”



Introducing Ayn Rand (1905-82)

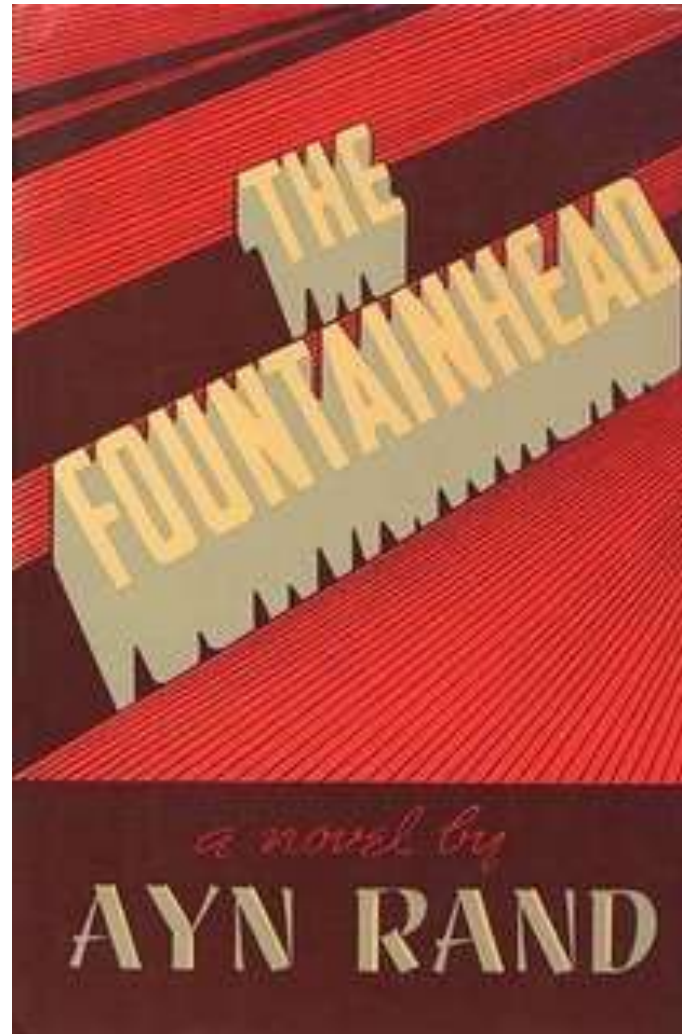
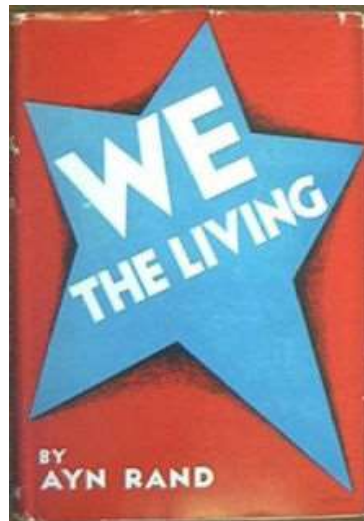
- Born Alisa Rosenbaum to middle-class Jewish parents in St Petersburg
- Eldest of three girls, father a pharmacist, mother a dentist
- Apparently teaches herself to read aged 6, and starts to write from 9
- Life disrupted by the Bolshevik Revolution: father goes out of business, and family flee to Crimea, Ukraine, before returning later
- Studies Philosophy and History at St Petersburg, part of first female cohort. Graduates in 1924 after restrictions on bourgeois students lifted
- Briefly studies screenwriting. Writes papers on Pola Negri and “Hollywood: American Movie-City” (1925-26) before managing to escape to the US in 1926, on the pretext of visiting relatives





Ayn Rand in America

- 1926: stays with relatives in New York, one of whom owns a cinema...
- Moves to Hollywood at end of year. Chance meeting with director Cecil B. DeMille leads to work as an extra, then junior-screenwriter
- *Red Pawn* (1932), *Night of January 16th* (1934), *Ideal* (unpublished)
- *We the Living* (1936), *Anthem* (1938), *The Fountainhead* (1943), the last of which becomes a 1943 film starring Gary Cooper...
- Politically active anti-Communist from 1940s
- Moves to New York from 1951, gathering a group of disciples
- *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), her last novel. Later years spent giving talks and producing essays on her philosophy – Objectivism
- Dies in 1982 from heart disease, her final years reliant on welfare



Mr. Roark, the commission is yours.
The Board of Directors...

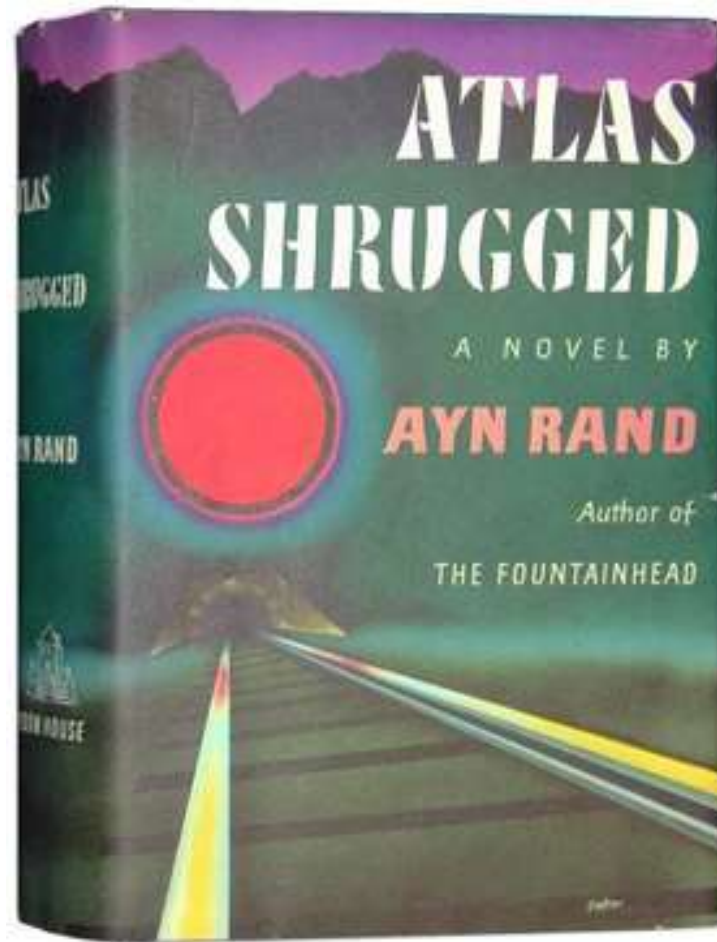
Ayn Rand overview

- All her works concerned with the struggle of the heroic individual against the stifling repression of the bureaucratic state
- *We the Living*: an intellectual autobiography of an independent-minded woman's struggle to leave a poor, depressed Soviet Union
- *Fountainhead*: a young architect who refuses to compromise to the architectural elite's historical styles and fashions, ultimately dynamiting a social housing project he helps design to protect his vision
- *Anthem*: new dark age dystopia where 'I' has been replaced by 'we', until Equality 7-2521 rediscovers electricity and idea of individuality...



‘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.’

— Ayn Rand, “Art and Cognition”, *The Romantic Manifesto*

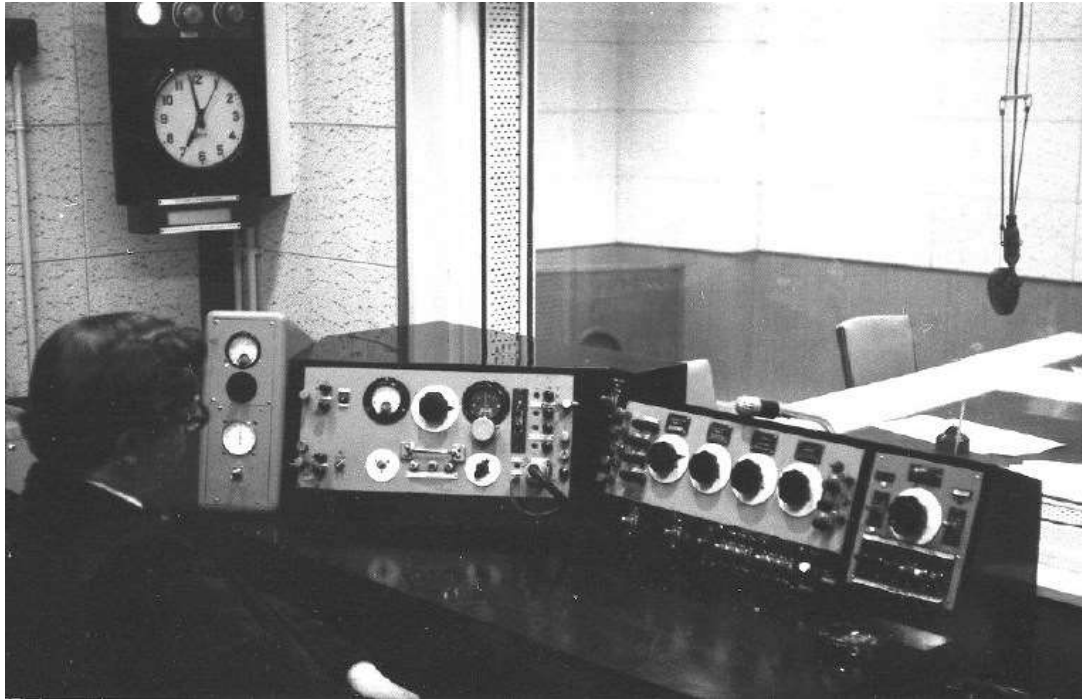


Atlas Shrugged (1957) overview

- Written over 9 years, with input from 'the Collective', it is Rand's last novel and most mature statement of Objectivism
- 'I regret to say that the book is unsaleable and unpublishable.'
- Reviewers panned its length, wooden characters and ideas: 'execrable claptrap', 'remorseless hectoring and prolixity'
- ... 'out to destroy almost every edifice in the contemporary American way of life; our Judeo-Christian religion, our modified government-regulated capitalism, our rule by the majority will' (Newsweek review)
- In the 1990s, a survey by the Library of Congress named *Atlas Shrugged* as the most influential book in the US, after the Bible.

Atlas Shrugged (1957) overview

- Aim: 'to show how desperately the world needs prime movers and how viciously it treats them', showing 'what happens to the world without them'
- About a near-future USA in a socialist world facing economic collapse, as private businesses suffer through burdensome state laws and regulations
- Railroad exec Dagny Taggart and her lover, steel magnate Hank Rearden mount a struggle against 'looters' who freeride and exploit their productivity
- They come across the elusive John Galt, who has persuaded other business leaders to strike, hiding out in a secret valley...
- Towards the end, Galt hacks into the national radio and gives a rambling 60-page speech, outlining Rand's philosophy of rational selfishness...





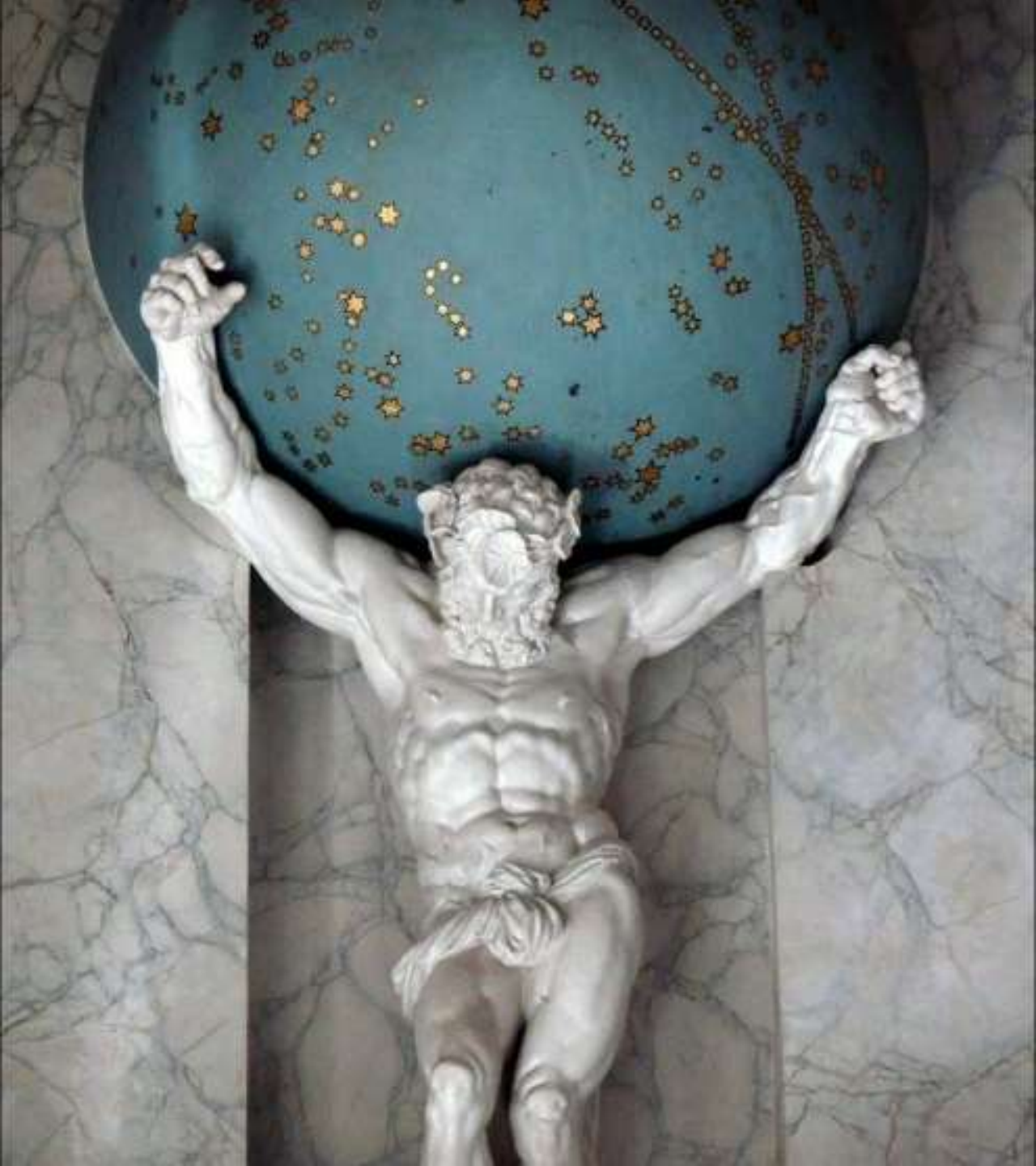
Over to you

Let's turn to the first part of Galt's speech. In groups discuss this question:

Why does Galt criticise the morality of sacrifice? What kind of morality does he argue for in its place? (e.g. 104)

The morality of reason

‘My morality, the morality of reason, is contained in a single axiom: existence exists—and in a single choice: to live. The rest proceeds from these. To live, man must hold three things as the supreme and ruling values of his life: Reason—Purpose—Self-esteem. Reason, as his only tool of knowledge—Purpose, as his choice of the happiness which that tool must proceed to achieve—Self-esteem, as his inviolate certainty that his mind is competent to think and his person is worthy of happiness, which means: is worthy of living. These three values imply and require all of man’s virtues, and all his virtues pertain to the relation of existence and consciousness: rationality, independence, integrity, honesty, justice, productiveness, pride.’
(104)



Galt's morality – summary

- To think is an act of choice, and what defines human nature is 'volitional consciousness'. Our identity as rational beings has to be chosen and lived up to
- 'There is a morality of reason, a morality proper to man, and Man's Life is its standard of value'. Its goal: to 'enjoy yourself and live' (100)
- Reality is that which exists. A is A. Existence exists. Reason then is our only standard of truth. And evil arises through not thinking.
- One must hold 3 supreme values to live: reason (your only tool for knowledge), purpose (your choice of the happiness in life) and self-esteem (your certainty that your mind can think, and hence live)
- 'I am, therefore I'll think' (147)

‘Pride is the recognition of the fact that you are your own highest value and, like all of man’s values, it has to be earned—that of any achievements open to you, the one that makes all others possible is the creation of your own character—that your character, your actions, your desires, your emotions are the products of the premises held by your mind...

Man, the rational being he is born able to create, but must create by choice—that the first precondition of self-esteem is that radiant selfishness of soul which desires the best in all things, in values of matter and spirit, a soul that seeks above all else to achieve its own moral perfection, valuing nothing higher than itself—and that the proof of an achieved self-esteem is your soul’s shudder of contempt and rebellion against the role of a sacrificial animal, against the vile impertinence of any creed that proposes to immolate the irreplaceable value which is your consciousness and the incomparable glory which is your existence to the blind evasions and the stagnant decay of others.’ (106)





‘What I actually am, Mr Reardan, is a policeman. It is a policeman’s duty to protect men from criminals - criminals being those who seize wealth by force. It is a policeman's duty to retrieve stolen property and return it to its owners. But when robbery becomes the purpose of the law, and the policeman's duty becomes, not the protection, but the plunder of property - then it is an outlaw who has to become a policeman.’ - Ragnar Danneskjold



Over to you

In groups, let's round up on Rand.
Discuss one of the two:

1. What role should governments play, according to John Galt? Can you recognise this argument in others? Do you agree? (152)
2. The one thing more loathsome than helping an undeserving man is one's agreement to do it (148-9)... What kind of arguments does Rand present in favour of hierarchy? Can we accept them?

‘The only proper purpose of a government is to protect man’s rights, which means: to protect him from physical violence. A proper government is only a policeman, acting as an agent of man’s self-defense, and, as such, may resort to force *only* against those who *start* the use of force. The only proper functions of a government are: the police, to protect you from criminals; the army, to protect you from foreign invaders; and the courts, to protect your property and contracts from breach or fraud by others, to settle disputes by rational rules, according to *objective* law.’ (152)



‘The man at the top of the intellectual pyramid contributes the most of all those below him, but gets nothing except his material payment, receiving no intellectual bonus from others to add to the value of his time. The man at the bottom who, left to himself, would starve in his hopeless ineptitude, contributes nothing to those above him, but receives the bonus of all of their brains. Such is the nature of the ‘competition’ between the strong and the weak of the intellect. (154)

‘we, who had dragged you out of your hovels and provided you with modern apartments, with radios, movies and cars, should own our palaces and yachts—you decided that *you* had a right to your wages, but *we* had no right to our profits’ (155)





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Evaluating Ayn Rand

- Undoubtedly one of the most influential political philosophers of our time, presenting a theory of rational selfishness which explains and justifies wealth inequality in the US and UK
- Like our discussions of Hobbes' social contract, this egoism is based on a profound and wilful ignorance of how society actually works...
- States, communities and families provide almost every aspect of our growth in this world – our autonomous minds emerge at the end. Freedom is a collective achievement
- Put into practice, Rand's objectivism results in colossal inequality and negligence of our most distressing social and ecological problems
- Yet its morality of hard work and self-sufficiency is appealing to many who, either in genuine cases or wealthy self-delusion, feel that their intrinsic worth is based on their capacity to earn and succeed...

Next week... *John Rawls and Liberalism*

- We turn to a classic figure of modern political philosophy and a staple of any English-speaking political theory programme
- We'll read from John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (1971)
- Key concepts: distributive justice, social fairness, an updated social contract, the veil of ignorance and the original position...
- I'd like to also cover some of the basic theoretical background of liberalism too, and I'll nod to Isaiah Berlin's famous essay 'Two Conceptions of Liberty' as well as John Stuart Mill
- Email any questions to dan.taylor@marywardcentre.ac.uk