

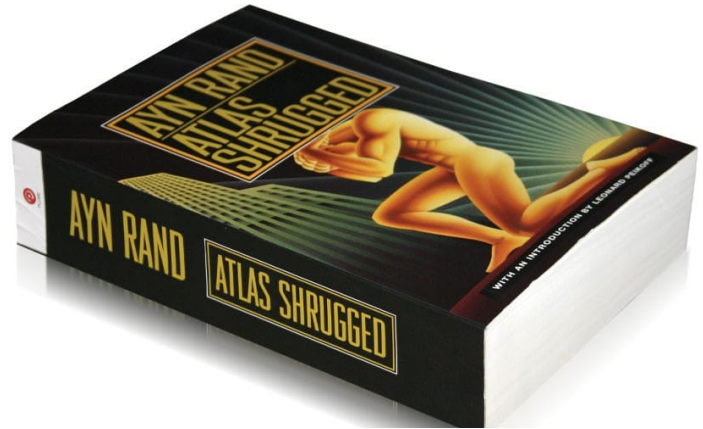


Written by [Charles Scaliger](#) on May 23, 2011

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Nothing to Shrug About

Some of us remember our first reading of *Atlas Shrugged* like our first time behind the wheel of a car: intoxicating but inexplicably discomfiting in spots. The 1,000-plus pages of Ayn Rand's magnum opus positively pulse with the sorts of stuff that those of us in the freedom camp embrace: heroic capitalists, a strident anti-collectivist cant, and the unapologetic championing of individual rights.



Bereft of the clichéd working-class heroes popularized by the likes of Steinbeck, *Atlas Shrugged* is a sort of anti-*Grapes of Wrath*, and its protagonist, corporate titan Dagny Taggart, the very antithesis of the downtrodden Tom Joad types so beloved of fashionably leftist literati. Taggart, along with other super-capitalists featured in the novel, is driven, intelligent, and courageous, committed to expanding her business (in this case, a transcontinental railroad corporation) against any odds.

The novel has overtones of science fiction: The world of *Atlas Shrugged* is a sort of parallel universe where the American Congress and President have been replaced with a National Legislature and Head of State, and the People's State of England is substituted for Great Britain. The industrial setting is curiously anachronistic, with factories organized along late-19th-century lines in a world whose technology is reminiscent of the early 1950s.

Atlas Shrugged is the story of one man's successful campaign to shut down society's engines of productivity by persuading the most productive innovators to withdraw their services. What begins as the story of Dagny Taggart's industrial (and, eventually, romantic) alliance with metal manufacturer Henry Rearden and their struggle against the productive class' fiercest competitor — government — gradually turns into something of a mystery as America's most productive industrialists, entrepreneurs, thinkers, and artists vanish without a trace, leaving behind their enterprises with no explanation. Henry Rearden himself finally disappears as the federal government, increasingly bereft of America's wealthiest and most productive citizens to parasitize, casts about frantically to find them.

As Dagny finally discovers, they are all living happy and productive lives in a well-hidden vale in the Colorado Rockies, free for the first time in their lives from the encroachments of bureaucrats, tax-and-spend politicians, and the rest of the government-affiliated parasitic caste. The leader of the disaffected productive class is the mysterious John Galt, who is determined to carry out a revolution against an unreasoning, predatory society that has done its best to strip them of their talents and assets.

Message and Morals

Beyond any dispute, *Atlas Shrugged* is a fine repudiation of the tawdry leveling impulse responsible for class envy and collectivism, which demagogues have exploited since time immemorial. The novel is a paean to risk-taking, achievement, and individual liberty, and its conclusion affords optimism that mankind may someday grow out of its long love affair with central planning. If Rand's fable seems preachy, well, it was intended to be. After all, although we are told incessantly that preachiness is a



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fatal defect in any story, no one has managed to explain precisely why this should be the case. The greatest stories ever told, from the Bible to the epics of classical antiquity to the plays of Shakespeare, all have pointed moral, political, or theological messages. Why should a modern epic like *Atlas Shrugged* be any different?

But what, exactly, is Rand preaching? A religious work *Atlas Shrugged* certainly is not; the atheist Rand saw religion (and all forms of “mysticism”) as irrational and partly responsible for false codes of morality and virtue that denigrate the individual and falsely enshrine altruism. In John Galt’s chapter-long radio sermon to America, where Rand’s philosophy (objectivism) is laid out, religion is portrayed as no different than secular collectivism:

For centuries, the battle of morality was fought between those who claimed that your life belongs to God and those who claimed that it belongs to your neighbors — between those who preached that the good is self-sacrifice for the sake of ghosts in heaven and those who preached that the good is self-sacrifice for the sake of incompetents on earth. And no one came to say that your life belongs to you and that the good is to live it.

Both sides agreed that morality demands the surrender of your self-interest and of your mind, that the moral and the practical are opposites, that morality is not the province of reason, but the province of faith and force. Both sides agreed that no rational morality is possible, that there is no right or wrong in reason — that is reason, there’s no reason to be moral.... Sweep aside those hatred-eaten mystics, who pose as friends of humanity and preach that the highest virtue man can practice is to hold his own life as of no value.

The whole of John Galt’s screed — and, by extension, of Rand’s objectivist philosophy — is a diatribe against “mystics” both spiritual and secular, whose avowed aim is tyranny over the human spirit:

Every dictator is a mystic, and every mystic is a potential dictator. A mystic craves obedience from men, not their agreement. He wants them to surrender their consciousness to his assertions, his edicts, his wishes, his whims — as his consciousness is surrendered to theirs. He wants to deal with men by means of faith and force — he finds no satisfaction in their consent if he must earn it by means of facts and reason.... His lust is to command, not to convince.... What he seeks is power over reality and over men’s means of perceiving it.

To the avowedly false creeds of the mystics, the only possible antidote is reason. To their false morality of altruism, only the counter-morality of self-interest can stand. Rand would have her readers believe that the individual is absolute and sovereign, and that every species of self-denial is both irrational and immoral. Reason, in point of fact, is the only valid font of morality, and reason dictates self-preservation and self-fulfillment above all else.

These are the adolescent cadences of dorm-room philosophy, dressed up in lofty, quasi-Aristotelian rhetoric. But Rand was no Aristotle. Her philosophy is laissez-faire reductionism of the coarsest variety, a simplistic, elitist dogma that conveniently dismisses most of human experience as irrational and destructive. For starters, individuals — *pace* Rand — are not absolute. We are not inherently self-aware, as any early childhood specialist can attest, but derive awareness of self from contact with others. (This



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is the reason that children learn the first person pronoun “I” much later than the third person, for example). Rather than being a pageant of unalloyed individual initiative, life is actually a delicate interplay of personal and social factors.

Rand’s anti-religion billingsgate is neither original nor accurate. There have been and continue to be religious fanatics and spiritual dictators, to be sure. But religion is the wellspring of the very creativity that Rand extols, from the architectural innovations of Gothic cathedrals to the music of Bach. And to insist that religion is hostile to reason is a simplistic caricature, beloved of atheists in every age but not borne out by the vast body of thought, from the ponderings of the schoolmen to the cosmology of LeMaître, conceived in a religious context. Rand’s blanket indictment of God and religion is the product of unreasoned enmity, not apodictic inquiry.

The phenomenon that no juvenile individualism such as objectivism can accommodate is family. Those who insist, as Rand does, that self-seeking is the only rational form of human behavior and that self-sacrifice is altogether contemptible, have no grasp of so-called family values. It is no accident that Rand and her epigones opposed traditional sexual mores, and that the protagonists in both *Atlas Shrugged* and in *The Fountainhead*, Rand’s other major novel, are sexually “liberated.” (Henry Rearden carries on an extramarital affair with Dagny Taggart, who in turn eventually leaves Rearden for a new sexual partner, John Galt). Both novels contain acts akin to rape between main characters as a device to cement their relationship, and Rand herself was notorious for her extra marital affairs. Yet the self-sacrificing family-centered value systems that Rand repudiates compel us to forgo sexual license and to cleave unto a single spouse, despite occasional temptations to do otherwise.

And family values extend far beyond the monogamy that Rand rejected. They embrace the sacrifice of parents who forgo self-gratification for the sake of rearing and educating their children properly, and who submit to comparative poverty and debt instead of the limitless possibilities for career advancement and earnings that carefree bachelorhood often confers. Rand’s characters are not, for the most part, family men and women, and appear to know nothing of the struggles of the millions of ordinary but decent people who put family ahead of career.

Quaint Capitalists

But even if none of this were true, Rand takes a quaintly naïve view of the alleged saintliness of successful capitalists. This is perhaps excusable, given her upbringing in Soviet Russia, but it is no less a serious defect of her work for that. Contrary to received mythology, most of America’s wealthiest and most successful lose their appetite for the free market by the time they reach the top. Most of our top industrialists, conscious of their vulnerability to potential competitors, become willing accomplices of the state in order to preserve their gains. It is, after all, the largest and best-connected firms that can afford legions of lobbyists, lawyers, and compliance officers to keep abreast of the latest regulations. They are rewarded with lucrative government contracts and grants of public monies for research and development. Their objective is not only to make money (no sin in itself, as Rand reminds us), but also to keep it by any means possible — and that usually includes enlisting the aid of organized coercion that government can provide. Whole swaths of the American economy, from railroads and aerospace to banking, real estate, and healthcare, are de facto public-private partnerships that protect and reward the well-connected at the expense of everyone else — and few corporate magnates find this at all objectionable. In fact, the 19th-century railroad titans after whom Dagny Taggart appears to be



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modeled achieved their dominance by enlisting the aid of the federal government to award them monopolistic privileges. Surveying the ranks of today's Fortune 500 executives and wealthiest entrepreneurs, with their government lobbyists pleading for special favors and their non-profit foundations pouring money into sundry anti-freedom causes like the global environmental movement, which limits people's freedom to do what they wish with their own property, we would be hard-pressed to find any with the disinterested, libertarian ideals of a John Galt or Henry Rearden.

Its flaws aside, *Atlas Shrugged* is a remarkably prescient work of dystopian fiction, far more accurate in its depiction of the future of industrial civilization than either *1984* or *Brave New World* has proven to be. The veritable army of hostile, self-serving bureaucrats curdled with envy at the success of Rand's capitalists, along with the venal politicians determined to level the successful into egalitarian bondage — these are what America has become since the Great Depression. Blaming the rich for our ongoing economic woes has become the sport of both major political parties. The welter of new controls — on healthcare, insurance, real estate, banking, finance, and other sectors — that have effused from Washington in the Age of Obama are the stuff of Wesley Mouch's fondest fantasies. Scarcely an industry remains that the federal government has not drawn into its micromanagerial web, and the clamor has risen to deafening decibels to raise taxes on the rich and on corporations to pay for the decades-old party that the government has thrown for itself.

Unfortunately, the prospects for a latter-day John Galt leading a strike of the productive class are dim indeed. Even if the likes of Galt, Rearden, and Taggart could be found in the highest echelons of capitalism, it is unlikely that they would either combine forces or forsake the rewards of their industry for what would doubtless provoke a pitiless assault on their integrity and their assets. Today's bureaucratic minions and the politicians they serve are entirely capable, with the connivance of the misnamed Justice Department, of stripping the successful of their assets with lawsuits, regulatory witch hunts, and punitive legislation. Few if any capitalists, no matter how libertarian their private inclinations might be, would be willing to risk all in a climate so implacably hostile to free-market capitalism, when they can still reap such substantial rewards by playing along with the system, rigged and corrupt though it is. Radical partisans of individual liberty like John Galt are produced by poverty and desperation, not wealth and frustration.

In sum, despite its Panglossian portrayal of those at the pinnacle of the productive pyramid, there is much to enjoy in *Atlas Shrugged*. As with so much creative output in our secular age, the work is marred (though not fatally) by its hostility to so many of the very axioms — like Christian virtue and enlightened self-denial — that gave rise in the first place to Western Civilization, with its commitment, however uneven, to individual liberty. Defects aside, though, *Atlas Shrugged* remains a timely and prescient cautionary tale, an extraordinary work of fiction that has won, and will doubtless continue to win, many converts to the cause of individual liberty.



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