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## **Ayn Rand's Philosophy of Objectivism – An Overview**

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### **Abstract**

Ayn Rand, a Russian American writer came to the forefront when Russian Revolution was at its peak. She personally experienced the atrocities of communism. So she fled to America, as she found it to be the freest country. But she was shocked when the Communist, Fascist and Nazis ideals became very popular in America. As a result the process of collectivization is portrayed successfully at a deeper level in her novels. Ayn Rand, through her novels has brought a sense of awakening about the horrors of collectivism and she framed a philosophy called 'objectivism'. In all her novels her characters exhibited her philosophy. This paper makes an attempt to brief the philosophical convictions of Ayn Rand.

## Keywords

Ayn Rand; Objectivism; Individualism; Metaphysics; Epistemology.



## Introduction

According to Ayn Rand, Philosophy is the fundamental factor in human life. It is the basic force that shapes the mind and the character of men and the destiny of nations. It shapes them for good or evil based in the philosophy men prefer. A man's choice is not whether to have a philosophy but which philosophy to have. He has to choose between a philosophy which is conscious, explicit, logical and therefore practical. Philosophy is a need for the human beings as a need for food. It is a need of the mind through which a man can achieve anything he and his life requires. As a conscious human being, a man requires a philosophy in order to assign appropriate meaning to the events around him. Ayn Rand considers the best way to study philosophy is to approach it as one approaches a detective story. Why and how are the criteria of detection. A man cannot find all the answers immediately, but he can acquire an invaluable character – the ability to think. Ayn Rand says

Nothing is given to man automatically, neither knowledge, nor self-confidence, nor inner serenity, nor the right way to use his mind. Every value he needs or wants has to be discovered, learned and acquired. Philosophical training gives man the proper intellectual posture – a proud, disciplined control of his mind. (*Philosophy Who Needs It* 10-11)

Ayn Rand's philosophy of objectivism can be broken into five branches- Metaphysics, Epistemology, Ethics, Politics, and Esthetics.

## Metaphysics

Metaphysics is a delimited subject. It identifies the fact of existence. It is the study of nature of the universe and man's relationship to the universe. It is the major branch upon which all the others rely. The nature of universe is

reality. Ayn Rand formulated the principle “existence exists” that is the universe exists independent of consciousness.

The first axiom of philosophy is existence and it is the widest of all the concepts. It included everything which exists, existed and will exist. It covers only what is known or what is felt by the human. Every human knows this fundamental fact that there is ‘something’, that they are ‘existing’. This axiom leads them to the ‘consciousness’. If a man wants to raise question pertaining to knowledge, whether of content or of method, he must be conscious of something and recognize that one is. Consciousness is the medium through which a man perceives what exists. In Ayn Rand words,

Existence exists – and the act of grasping that statement implies two corollary axioms: that something exist which one perceives and that one exists possessing consciousness, consciousness being the faculty of perceiving that which exists. (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* 6)

Consciousness is the awareness of existence and can only be experienced by an entity. Without existence there could be no consciousness. Existence would exist even if all its entities were unconscious. So consciousness is simply an awareness of existence. Hence Existence has primacy over consciousness.

The third and final basic axiom is ‘identity’ which is implicit in the first two. The law of identity: “to be is to be something, to have a nature, to possess identity” (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* 6).

In traditional formula A is A. By the law of identity existence has a certain nature and only that nature. This ‘metaphysically given’ nature cannot be altered or controlled by consciousness. Man can rearrange entities to suit his needs, but he cannot break the laws of nature.

By the ‘metaphysically given’ Ayn Rand means any fact natural in existence apart from human action as against man made facts. For example, the solar system is metaphysically given, communication satellites are man-

made. So the metaphysically given is absolute. But Ayn Rand does not deny that man has the power of creativity, the power to adapt the materials of nature to his own requirements.

Creation does not mean the power to bring something in top existence out of nothing. Creation means the power to bring into existence an arrangement of natural elements that had not existed before. (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* 25)

Metaphysically given facts are reality. They are not subject to anyone's appraisal; they must be accepted without evaluation. "They are, were, will be and have to be" (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* 25).

### **Epistemology**

Epistemology is the major and complex branch of philosophy. It is the science that studies the nature and means of human knowledge. A man can acquire knowledge only when he performs certain definite process. He cannot accept everything and counts them as knowledge. He needs to discover a method of cognition. He needs to learn how to use his mind, how to distinguish truth from falsehood, how to validate the conclusions he reaches. Epistemology is the science that tells what rules a man should follow to acquire conceptual knowledge. It defines man's relationship with his mind is his reason.

Reason is the central and a highly complex concept in the philosophy of Ayn Rand. Objectivism stresses the principle 'follow reason'. Reason begins with the facts, (that is data observed by the senses) which organizes these data in accordance with facts and which is guided at each step by rules that rest on the fundamental fact.

There is a relationship between metaphysics and epistemology, between reality and reason. The two components of this relationship are sense perception and volition. Perception is necessarily a process of interaction. There is no way to perceive an object that does not impinge on one's body. Consciousness is the faculty of perception. Its function is directly to look

outward, to perceive that which exists and to do so by a certain means. Direct perception denotes a grasp of reality attained. In Ayn Rand's definition,

Perception is a group of sensations automatically retained and integrated by the brain of a living organism, which gives it the ability to be aware, not of single stimuli, but of entities, of things. (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* 23)

So the direct experience means the perceptual level of consciousness. Starting from perceptual fact, a man formed conceptual vocabulary, then, step by step, he acquired substantial physical and psychological knowledge – knowledge of external stimuli – of his own sense organs, brain and consciousness.

Man's power of volition is the power to seek awareness of reality or to dispense with it. Volition includes different kinds of choices – in or out of focus or to evade is man's volition. Reason is a faculty of volition. It has the power to direct its own actions and check its conclusions, the power to maintain a certain relationship to the facts of reality.

Reason is the only means of human knowledge. There is no alternative or supplement to reason. If a man seeks to think rationally, he must grasp the distinction between reason and emotion. He must learn and then observe the difference between thought and feeling, between logic and desire, and between precepts and concepts. Through his reasoning, he must ensure that feelings should be set aside.

Objectivism is not an 'anti-emotion' viewpoint. Of course, emotions play an essential role in human life. Without this men cannot achieve happiness or even survival. Emotions cannot discover reality but reason can. Reason is the fundamental faculty of human consciousness. Emotions are derivative. A man must start any inquiry on the focus of reality. He must form conclusions, his value-judgments according to his reason. In this approach to life, reality and

reason are given the primary position. While stressing the importance of reason, Ayn Rand says,

...to think is an act of choice...Reason does not work automatically; thinking is not a mechanical process; the connections of logic are not made by instinct. The function of your stomach, lungs or heart is automatic; the function of your mind is not. You are free to think or to evade that effort. But you are not free to escape from your nature, from the fact that reason is your means of survival. (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* 26)

### **Ethics**

Ethics is a science which deals with discovering and defining a code of values to guide man's choices and actions that determine the purpose and the course of his life. What are the light goals for man to pursue? What are the values required for his survival? These are the questions to be answered by the science of ethics. The standard value of objectivist ethics is the standard by which one judges what is good or evil. Since reason is man's basic means of survival, that which is proper to the life of a man is the good and that which destroys his life is the evil.

Man must choose his actions, values and goals by the standard that which is proper to man. Objectivist ethics holds three ultimate values with their corresponding virtues. They are reason, purpose, and self-esteem with rationality, productiveness and pride. The basic virtue of man is rationality. The act of not focusing is the basic vice of man. Hence the suspension of consciousness is not blindness but man's refusal to see or the refusal to know. The virtue of rationality means the recognition and acceptance of reason as only means of human knowledge. Rational man dislikes evasion. Evasion brings harm to the evader and the cure for this is the ruthless practice of rationality. To practice it one should identify its six interconnected virtues.

**Virtue of Independence:** One's acceptance of the responsibility of forming one's own judgments and of living by the work of one's own mind.

**Virtue of Integrity:** One must never sacrifice one's convictions to the opinions or wishes of others.

**Virtue of Honesty:** One must never attempt to fake reality.

**Virtue of Justice:** One must judge people's character and conduct objectively and act accordingly, grant each person that which he earns.

**Virtue of Productiveness:** One's recognition of the fact that productive work is the process by which man's mind sustains his life. It is process by which man adjusts his background to himself.

**Virtue of Pride:** One must earn the right to hold oneself as one's own highest value by achieving one's own moral perfection. It means one's rejection of the role of a sacrificial animal, and it is the rejection of any doctrine that imposes self-immolation as a moral virtue.

The basic social principle of the objectivist ethics is that just as life is an end in itself, so every living human being is an end in himself, not the means to the ends or the welfare of others – and, therefore, that man must live for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself for others nor sacrificing others for himself. To live for his own sake means that the achievement of his own happiness is man's highest moral purpose. (*The Virtue of Selfishness* 30)

Man has the ability to feel something is good for him or evil depending on the standard of the value he chooses. If he chooses irrational values, then he leads to his own destruction. It is by his rational values, a man can attain happiness. Objectivism advocates rational selfishness which is a required value for human survival. A rationally selfish man is a man of self-esteem, and he is only capable of love or respect, because a man who does not value himself cannot value anything or anyone. It is only on the basis of rational selfishness men can be fit to live together in a rational society.

## Politics

Politics is a science that defines the principles of a proper social system, including the proper functioning of a government. The basic principle of politics is individual rights. According to Rand, “Right is a moral principle defining and sanctioning a man’s freedom of action in a social context” (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* 351).

The fundamental right of man is the right to live. Man should have the right to live; he should take the necessary actions for the fulfillment and enjoyment of his own life that is to have liberty for the pursuit of happiness. A man should have the freedom of action. He should have the freedom to act on his own judgments, towards his own goals, through voluntary choice. A man should have the right to property. No one has the right to claim or manage the life or property of others without their consent. Only the individual human beings have the power of choice and only the individual have the rights. Ayn Rand says,

The source of man’s rights is not divine law or congressional law, but the law of identity. A is A – and Man is Man. Rights are conditions of existence required by man’s nature for his proper survival. If man is to live on earth it is right for him to use his mind, it is right to act on his own free judgment, it is right to work for his values and to keep the product of his work. If life on earth is his purpose, he has a right to live as a rational being; nature forbids him the irrational. (*The Virtue of Selfishness* 111)

The function of a government is to protect man’s rights by protecting him from physical violence. The government should not act as a ruler, it should serve the individuals. The individual rights should supersede the public or social power. The consequence of this will be a civilized society, from which the physical force is banned, in which the government acting as a policeman.



Rand is in full appreciation of America's political philosophy that is implicated in the principle of individual rights. It was with the concept of individual rights, the free society had born. When the government destroyed individual rights, the destruction of freedom began.

It is to be noticed that right to life means right to support a man's life by his own work. It does not mean that others must provide him with the necessities of life. The right to property means that a man has the right to take the actions necessary to earn property, to use it or to dispose of it. The right to speech means a man has the right to express his own ideas without suppressing other's ideas. If an action requires many men, it requires the voluntary consent of all. Every one of them has the right to enforce it on others. Any group that does not recognize this principle is not an association, but a gang or a mob.

This is same in the case of nations, because a nation is only a number of individuals and can have no rights other than the rights of its individual citizens. If the constitution of a country holds individual power above the political power, then the citizens will agree to abide the laws of the nation. Such a nation has a right to its own sovereignty

Rand advocated capitalism as the only moral social system. In her definition "Capitalism is a social system based on the recognition of individual rights, including property rights, in which all property is privately owned" (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* 380).

It is the only system that allows people to act with freedom and act according to their own conclusions. It is the only system where the government leaves the people alone to trade freely and voluntarily with each other. Those who practice the objectivist virtues of independence, integrity, honesty, justice, productiveness and pride benefit most from the capitalist government.

**Esthetics:**

The last of the five branches is the philosophy of esthetics, the philosophy of art. It is a derivative of other major branches, like politics. Politics is derivative of ethics and art is the derivative of the major branch metaphysics. A work of art serves the purpose of man's contemplation of it. Objectivism holds that art has the purpose, a rational, worldly, practical purpose. To Ayn Rand

Art is inextricably tied to man's survival – not to his physical survival, but to that on which his physical survival depends: to the preservation and survival of his consciousness. (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* 414)

An artist uses the two basic process of human consciousness – isolating and integrating. Guided by his metaphysical aspects, an artist selects the matters that are indicative of nature of the universe. He embodies them in a sensory-perceptual concrete such as a statue, a painting or a story. The result is a view of universe in a concrete way, shorn of the irrelevances and provides a good view to the readers.

So art converts abstracts into precepts. It enables man to contemplate his view of the world not out of his consciousness but as an external face. To a rational man, art that objectifies his metaphysics provides a unique kind of inspiration. It serves as a source of emotional fuel. A rational man's goals require a lifetime effort and action. He needs a moment of rest. By the power of recreate reality art can give man the pleasure of feeling what it would be like to live in his ideal world.

Man reacts to art according to his characters. When a work of art objecting his metaphysics, the reader experiences a confirmation of his mind 'your approach to values is right'. When it clashes with man's metaphysics, then it gives the message 'reality is not what you think, your values are a delusion, you as a person are wrong'.

Though art projects a moral ideal, its goal is not to teach men that ideal. To teach is the task of philosophy. Ayn Rand said, “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” (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* 423).

Some may say art is concerned to teach. Even then it teaches not the theory but a technique of directing one’s awareness towards the metaphysically essential. In judging an art work’s philosophy, one is concerned with a question of truth. The reader may feel that a work is great, but his feeling doesn’t make the work great. A valid assessment requires a process of reason. The judgment should be regardless of individual artist’s philosophy. Ayn Rand advocates three esthetic principles. The first is ‘selectivity in regard to subject’. Since the subject conveys the artist’s metaphysics, the artist should make a conscious, rational choice. The second one is ‘clarity’. Clarity means the quality of being distinct, sharp and evident. The third one is ‘the hallmark of art – integration’. In a proper work of art, the whole implies the part, just as the parts imply one another and the whole. Aristotle, who upheld a similar esthetic principle said, “A proper story must have all the organic unity of a living creature”.

### **Conclusion**

Ayn Rand made a significant contribution in philosophy. Rand named her philosophy ‘objectivism’ describing its essence as the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as his moral purpose of his life, with productivity as his noblest activity and reason as his only absolute. In metaphysics, Rand embraced philosophical realism. In epistemology, she considered all knowledge to be based on sense perception and reason. In ethics, she argued for rational self-interest. In politics, she emphasized individual rights and advocated capitalism. In esthetics, she defined art and ways to judge that art. She believed epistemology was the basic branch of philosophy and reason was the most significant aspect of her philosophy.

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