

# Ayn Rand's American Morality

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**T**he American founders created the greatest country on earth. The United States is the only country in history based on the principle of individual rights—the idea that each individual's life belongs to him (the right to life), that he should be free to act in accordance with his judgment (liberty), to pursue the goals and values of his choice (pursuit of happiness), to keep and use the product of his effort (property), and to express his ideas regardless of what anyone thinks or feels about them (freedom of speech).

Although America initially permitted slavery to continue, Americans increasingly recognized that it violated the principle of individual rights and ultimately fought a bloody civil war to abolish it. The power of this principle was remarkable. Over time, it helped more and more Americans to see that black people, women, homosexuals, and people of all stripes have the same rights and that the government should protect everyone's rights equally.

Granted, the rights of Americans—especially industrialists, business owners, and the wealthy—are not fully recognized or protected today. Antitrust laws, licensing laws, capital gains taxes, coercively funded government schools, and many other violations of rights remain in play. But even with these problems, America, relative to the rest of the world, is a beacon of freedom and opportunity.

Some people don't like this fact. Today—even as foreigners paddle makeshift rafts through shark-infested waters to come to America—so-called “social justice warriors,” pushers of “critical race theory,” and others on the ever-worsening political left claim that the United States is fundamentally unjust, systemically racist, and evil because capitalist.

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Although these claims are demonstrably false, they are gaining traction, being taught in more and more schools, and undermining good people's confidence in American exceptionalism. If this trend continues, these ideas could destroy the land of liberty.

One of the main reasons that leftists can get away with spreading such ideas is that Americans generally do not understand the *moral foundation* of individual rights or why the American way of life is *morally good*.<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately, the Russian-born American philosopher Ayn Rand identified these important truths. They are aspects of her morality, which she called the Objectivist ethics.

To the extent that we Americans come to understand Rand's morality and integrate it with the founders' political ideas and a sound understanding of history, we will be better equipped to defend America, to live the American way, and to refute the lies that enemies of America tell in their effort to destroy this great country.

Rand's morality is rich, and my purpose here is merely to indicate some of its key points as they relate to the American founding and the American way of life.

Rand provided a secular, evidence-based foundation for the principle of individual rights. This is an enormous asset for Americans. Although the founders created America with the idea that rights are self-evident or God-given, neither assumption is supported by evidence. Consequently, beginning immediately after the founding and continuing to this day, philosophers and political theorists have mocked the idea of inalienable rights as "nonsense upon stilts," "strongly asserted, but . . . never proved," and lacking "determinate and intelligible meaning."<sup>2</sup> The lack of evidence offered for the existence of rights has convinced many that "belief in them is one with belief in witches and unicorns."<sup>3</sup> Rights asserted without evidence cannot be defended rationally.

Rand, however, showed that rights are evidence-based abstract principles—principles derived from observations and integrations of the factual requirements of human life in a social context.<sup>4</sup>

Her basic idea is that human beings survive, most fundamentally, by means of reason: the faculty that operates by means of perceptual observation, conceptual integration, and logic. We use reason to discover what things are, what qualities they have, and how we can use them to support and enhance our lives. For instance, people used reason to learn about plants, soil, the principles of agriculture, and how to produce food; about wool, silk, how to make looms, and how to produce clothing; about the principles of chemistry and biology and how to produce medicine

and perform surgery; and so on. Reason is our means of understanding the world, ourselves, and our needs.

But reasoning alone is insufficient to sustain and further human life. In order to live, we must also *act* in accordance with our rational judgment. And the only way that anyone—including governments—can stop us from acting in accordance with our judgment is by means of physical force (i.e., coercion).

If a government forces you to shut down your business or to stop criticizing the government—or if it prohibits you from offering or accepting a particular wage for work or from having sex with your lover—you cannot act fully on your judgment. Physical force used against a human being stops him from acting in accordance with his basic means of living: the judgment of his mind.

Of course, force comes in degrees, and the degrees matter. But any degree of force used against a person stops him from acting on his judgment *to that extent*. If the government shoots you in the head, that is an extreme degree of force, and it stops you from acting on your judgment at all. If the government throws you in a gulag, that is a slightly lesser degree of force, which almost totally stops you from acting on your judgment. If the government confiscates your business or forces you to shut it down, that is still a lesser degree of force, but it stops you from acting on your judgment with respect to your business. And if the government forces you to pay for someone else's medical care, that is still less force, but it stops you from using that portion of your money in accordance with your judgment.<sup>5</sup>

To the extent that physical force is used against a human being, it stops him from acting in accordance with his basic means of living: the judgment of his mind. It stops him from living a fully human life. This is why slavery is morally wrong. It's why all lesser degrees of the use of physical force against human beings are morally wrong. It's the evidence-based reason why the initiation of physical force against *any* human being is morally wrong.

In Rand's morality, this evidence-based truth gives rise to the principle of individual rights: In order for people to live fully as human beings, they must be fully free to act in accordance with their judgment—so long as they do not initiate physical force against other human beings.

Because Rand's theory of rights is evidence-based, it is rationally understandable and defensible. It grounds America's original founding principle in perceptual reality—facts we can see. And it enables us to explain the basis of rights to others who are willing to think.

Intimately connected with the principle of individual rights is the concept of *individualism*, another keystone of Rand's morality.

Rand saw all human beings as individuals—each with his own mind, his own body, his own life. She saw that each individual has the capacity to think for himself, to choose his values and actions, and to form his own character. She utterly rejected the notion that a person’s ideas, values, or character are determined by some group to which he allegedly belongs, whether a race, class, gender, or other collective.

Rand regarded all forms of collectivism as monstrous. In regard to *racism*—the form of collectivism that certain “intellectuals” in America are pushing today—she wrote:

Racism is the lowest, most crudely primitive form of collectivism. It is the notion of ascribing moral, social or political significance to a man’s genetic lineage—the notion that a man’s intellectual and characterological traits are produced and transmitted by his internal body chemistry. Which means, in practice, that a man is to be judged, not by his own character and actions, but by the characters and actions of a collective of ancestors.

Racism claims that the content of a man’s mind (not his cognitive apparatus, but its *content*) is inherited; that a man’s convictions, values and character are determined before he is born, by physical factors beyond his control. This is the caveman’s version of the doctrine of innate ideas—or of inherited knowledge—which has been thoroughly refuted by philosophy and science. Racism is a doctrine of, by and for brutes. It is a barnyard or stock-farm version of collectivism, appropriate to a mentality that differentiates between various breeds of animals, but not between animals and men.<sup>6</sup>

Today’s newfangled racists—the self-described “antiracists”—have even less excuse than did racists of the past for embracing this caveman philosophy. And Americans should not for a minute let these brutes get away with the nonsense that their call for the use of physical force against certain individuals is justified in the name of defending minorities. As Rand wrote, “The smallest minority on earth is the individual. Those who deny individual rights, cannot claim to be defenders of minorities.”<sup>7</sup>

Rand’s morality does much more than ground individual rights and uphold individualism. It also provides principled guidance for living thoughtfully and striving constantly to improve one’s life and achieve the greatest happiness possible: In other words, it provides guidance for living the American way.

Rand held that the requirements of human *life* constitute the standard of moral value—the standard by reference to which we can determine what is good or bad, right or wrong, what we should or shouldn’t do. This integrates perfectly with the fact that the right to life is the primary right. Likewise, Rand held that achieving personal happiness is the moral purpose of each individual’s life—that each person

should pursue the goals and values that will fill his life with joy while respecting the rights of others to do the same. This integrates perfectly with the right to the pursuit of happiness. And Rand identified and defined several basic virtues for helping people to live fully and achieve happiness.<sup>8</sup>

One of these is the virtue of *independence*—the commitment to think for oneself, to form one's own judgments, and to live by the work of one's own mind.<sup>9</sup>

Rand showed that independence stands in contrast to both “secondhandedness”—deference to others about what to think or value—and “parasitism,” or the “entitlement mentality”—expecting others to provide the goods and services one needs in order to live.

Whereas the founders fought for and established *political* independence for Americans, Rand showed that *personal* independence, a core tenet of the American way of life, is morally good.

In terms of independent thinking, Rand stressed, “Your mind is your only judge of truth—and if others dissent from your verdict, reality is the court of final appeal.”<sup>10</sup>

The mind is an attribute of the individual. There is no such thing as a collective brain. There is no such thing as a collective thought. An agreement reached by a group of men is only a compromise or an average drawn upon many individual thoughts. It is a secondary consequence. The primary act—the process of reason—must be performed by each man alone.<sup>11</sup>

Many people in America are independent thinkers, even if they've never heard the virtue spelled out this way before. And many live by the work of their own minds, which is the other aspect of independence—as well as the essence of another deeply American virtue in Rand's morality: *productiveness*.

Productiveness is the commitment to producing goods or services to support or further one's life and happiness.<sup>12</sup> It's the virtue of creating wealth or making money.

Whereas other moral codes regard creating wealth or making money as bad or morally suspect, Rand saw the creation of wealth as profoundly virtuous. Indeed, she celebrated the fact that Americans invented the phrase “to make money”:

If you ask me to name the proudest distinction of Americans, I would choose—because it contains all the others—the fact that they were the people who created the phrase “to *make* money.” No other language or nation had ever used these words before; men had always thought of wealth as a static quantity—to be seized, begged, inherited, shared, looted or obtained as a favor. Americans were the first to understand that wealth has to be created.<sup>13</sup>

Creators of wealth, in Rand's view, are heroes. They provide the goods that support human life and enable human happiness. But wealth creators often are treated as villains, and Rand saw this as obscenely unjust. In her view, men and women who create the values that support, enhance, and enrich our lives deserve our admiration, gratitude, and praise.

What could be more American than that?

In addition to seeing wealth creation as virtuous, Rand saw *trade* as virtuous. And, importantly, she did not regard this virtue as limited to material goods. She showed that it applies to spiritual values as well. "The principle of *trade*," as she put it, "is the only rational ethical principle for all human relationships, personal and social, private and public, spiritual and material."

A trader is a man who earns what he gets and does not give or take the undeserved. He does not treat men as masters or slaves, but as independent equals. He deals with men by means of a free, voluntary, unforced, uncoerced exchange—an exchange which benefits both parties by their own independent judgment. A trader does not expect to be paid for his defaults, only for his achievements. He does not switch to others the burden of his failures, and he does not mortgage his life into bondage to the failures of others.

In spiritual issues—(by "spiritual" I mean: "pertaining to man's consciousness")—the currency or medium of exchange is different, but the principle is the same. Love, friendship, respect, admiration are the emotional response of one man to the virtues of another, the spiritual *payment* given in exchange for the personal, selfish pleasure which one man derives from the virtues of another man's character.<sup>14</sup>

Another fundamental and deeply American virtue in Rand's morality is *justice*: the commitment to judging people rationally—according to the available and relevant facts—and treating them accordingly—as they deserve to be treated.<sup>15</sup>

Whether assessing someone for a business partnership or recreational activities, friendship or romance, a babysitting job or political office, we need to judge people, and we need to judge them rationally. "The precept: 'Judge not, that ye be not judged,'" Rand wrote, "is an abdication of moral responsibility. . . . The moral principle to adopt in this issue, is: 'Judge, and be prepared to be judged'":

Nothing can corrupt and disintegrate a culture or a man's character as thoroughly as does the precept of *moral agnosticism*, the idea that one must never pass moral judgment on others, that one must be morally tolerant of anything, that the good consists of never distinguishing good from evil.

It is obvious who profits and who loses by such a precept. It is not justice or equal treatment that you grant to men when you abstain equally from praising men's virtues and from condemning men's vices. When your impartial attitude declares, in effect, that neither the good nor the evil may expect anything from you—whom do you betray and whom do you encourage?<sup>16</sup>

Rand recognized that only one kind of person has anything to fear from moral judgment. The rest of us can only benefit from it.

Rand's conception of justice is especially useful for defending good people, businesses, and institutions when they are attacked—as they often are today by the so-called “woke.” Of course, it's also important to condemn evil people. But the most important application of this virtue is acknowledging and defending the good. They are the thinkers, the producers, the creators of life-promoting values. They support human life and happiness. Thus, the chief concern of justice is that they be treated accordingly.

The final virtue in Rand's morality that I'll mention in this brief survey is *integrity*. Rand saw integrity *not* merely as “acting on one's convictions” but as adherence to *rational principles* and the values that genuinely support and enhance one's life.<sup>17</sup> On this conception, for instance, although the 9/11 hijackers acted on their faith-based convictions, they did not have integrity; rather, they betrayed all that is true and good by acting irrationally and attacking the country that essentially stands for what is true and good—freedom, individual rights, individualism, independent thinking, wealth creation, justice, and the enjoyment of life.

A person of integrity *thinks* about his life and his values. He forms his convictions by means of *reason*. He organizes his values in accordance with their relative importance to his life and happiness, and he upholds or pursues them accordingly.

For instance, he thinks about the importance of his career, his health, his friendships, romance, recreational activities, and freedom—and he apportions his time, energy, and money accordingly, to live fully and maximize his happiness. Put negatively, he never gives up greater values for the sake of lesser values or non-values (such as seventy-two virgins in an alleged afterlife). He may trade a value for something greater or more important to his life and happiness (e.g., trading money for dance lessons). He may forgo a particular value for the sake of a more life-serving value (e.g., forgoing a Ferrari in order to send his child to a good school). But he never intentionally gives up something more important to his life and happiness for the sake of something less important. He never commits a sacrifice.

A person of integrity takes his values seriously, and he upholds and pursues them accordingly. He takes good care of himself. He helps his friends and loved

ones when he thinks help is warranted. He strives to make his life the best, happiest life it can be—by *integrating* his values into a harmonious whole.

And his values may extend beyond his regular activities and the people he knows. If he has time, money, or energy to spare, he may give to a charity or volunteer to help a particular cause that he cares about. In such a case, providing help *integrates* with his own interests; thus, it adds *spiritual* value to his life. He gains the satisfaction of knowing that he helped people or a cause that he wanted to help—and that he could afford to help them because of his productiveness. On Rand's conception of integrity, even “undertaking a *difficult* job of helping others—when it coincides with your own interests—is quite proper. In fact, that's heroic.”<sup>18</sup>

Here again, we can see that Rand's morality is deeply American. This is essentially how rational Americans decide when to help others and how much help to give: They ask themselves whether they can afford it, and they ask themselves which causes are most important to them based on their values. Given how productive, benevolent, and generous many Americans are, it's no surprise that they give huge sums of money to charities every year. In 2020, Americans gave \$471 billion dollars to charity—more per capita than any other nation on the planet.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, the charity that Americans give is only a drop in the bucket compared to the immense value of the products and services they create and sell. By living the American way—by being independent, thinking for themselves, being productive, making money, trading value for value, treating people justly, pursuing happiness, and loving their lives—Americans shower themselves, their fellow Americans, and the world at large with life-serving values and wealth.

Ayn Rand's morality regards all of this as supremely virtuous.

Real Americans, genuine Americans—not those who merely live here, but individuals anywhere in the world who live the American way—are wonderful people. And they deserve a moral code that supports their wonderful way of life, a code that grounds the principle of individual rights in the facts of reality, a code that provides guidance for pursuing and achieving happiness, a code that enables them to defend the greatest country in the world against barbarians who seek to destroy it.

That moral code is Ayn Rand's Objectivist ethics, which she described as “the philosophically-worked-out proof of what the Founding Fathers implied in the Declaration.”<sup>20</sup>

Let's embrace it.

## Endnotes

1. Another reason is that government schools and “progressive” education have rendered many Americans ignorant of history. But that's a subject for another day.



2. Jeremy Bentham, quoted in Sidney Hook, *The Paradoxes of Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), 8; Pannomial Fragments, chap. 3, <https://www.laits.utexas.edu/poltheory/bentham/pannomial/pannomial.c03.html>.
3. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 69.
4. See Ayn Rand's essay, "Man's Rights," in *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet, 1964); see also my article, "Ayn Rand's Theory of Rights: The Moral Foundation of a Free Society," *The Objective Standard*, 6, no. 3 (Fall 2011).
5. All such force involves related and less direct consequences, too, but the point here is that force comes in degrees.
6. Rand, "Racism," in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 147.
7. Ayn Rand, "America's Persecuted Minority: Big Business," in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (New York: Signet, 1967), 61.
8. For Rand's proof of life as the standard of value, see "The Objectivist Ethics" in *The Virtue of Selfishness*. See also my essay, "Secular, Objective Morality: Look and See," *The Objective Standard*, 12, no. 2 (Summer 2017).
9. See Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics."
10. Ayn Rand, "This is John Galt Speaking," in *For the New Intellectual* (New York: Signet, 1961), 126.
11. Rand, "The Soul of an Individualist," in *For the New Intellectual*, 78–79.
12. See Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Meridian, 1993), 292.
13. Rand, "The Meaning of Money," in *For the New Intellectual*, 94. Americans may not have created the phrase "to make money." The phrase "make money" (sans the "to") appears twice in Shakespeare's *Othello*. But the context and meaning there were entirely different.
14. Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," 34–35.
15. See Peikoff, *Objectivism*, 276.
16. Rand, "How Does One Lead a Rational Life in an Irrational Society," in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 82.
17. See Peikoff, *Objectivism*, 259.
18. From an interview with Michael Jackson, KNX radio, January 4, 1966, <https://youtu.be/bdp4qiPY08s>, emphasis added.
19. "Giving USA 2021: In a year of unprecedented events and challenges, charitable giving reached a record \$471.44 billion in 2020," June 15, 2021, <https://philanthropynetwork.org/news/giving-usa-2021-year-unprecedented-events-and-challenges-charitable-giving-reached-record-47144>; CAF World Giving Index, 10th ed., October 2019, [https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/about-us-publications/caf\\_wgi\\_10th\\_edition\\_report\\_2712a\\_web\\_101019.pdf](https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/about-us-publications/caf_wgi_10th_edition_report_2712a_web_101019.pdf).
20. Ayn Rand, *Ayn Rand Answers: The Best of Her Q & A*, edited by Robert Mayhew (New York: New American Library, 2005), 47.