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Ayn Rand and Murray Rothbard: The Verdict after Fifty Years by Nelson Hultberg

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by [Elias Alias](#) , [March 18, 2015](#)

[Editor's Note: Before you read the article below, let me note for you that Nelson Hultberg's newest book is linked at the bottom of this article. I am ordering my copy now, and others in the Readers' Regiment will want to get theirs too. Here is what Dr. Edwin Vieira says about the book:

“Nelson Hultberg’s The Golden Mean provides an outstanding explanation and defense of limited government. Its content is sweeping, its analysis comprehensive, its conclusions sound. Libertarians, classical liberals, and conservatives will find a pithy insight on almost every page to engage them, challenge them, enlighten them, and sometimes even exasperate them in the best tradition of critical analysis. This is a work that will goad its readers into thinking seriously about the permanent essentials of the natural political order – and about what needs to be done to restore those principles in America. Nothing could be more timely and important.” — Edwin Vieira, Jr.

Also at bottom of this article is a link to Nelson Hultberg's “Americans For A Free Republic” website. And remember please that Nelson appeared in James Jaeger's movie documentary named [SPOILER](#), which was based one of Nelson's previous books on how a third party could win in a national election. Now, please enjoy this brilliant piece of “American” philosophy in the following article which Mr. Hultberg graciously authorized us to publish here at Oath Keepers.

Salute!

Elias Alias, editor]

Speech given to Freedom Fest, Las Vegas, NV

by Nelson Hultberg

[Ayn Rand and Murray Rothbard](#)

Ayn Rand and Murray Rothbard

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. What I will be discussing in my talk today is the crucial role that

the ideas of Ayn Rand and Murray Rothbard have played in the defense of liberty and Western civilization.

All Americans, well read in political affairs, know of these famous thinkers. They were two of the most powerful and revolutionary intellectuals in the 20th century, contributing many valuable insights to our knowledge of philosophy, politics, and economics. As with most intellectual rebels, their major ideas about freedom and government were highly controversial. What I will do in this talk is explain what these controversies are, demonstrating the wisdom and folly of their ideas. As to which is the more prevalent, wisdom or folly, stay tuned.

I will also explain a new way for libertarians and conservatives to look at the political spectrum and the egoism-altruism clash that Ayn Rand promoted so dramatically. This will be done by using the Greek philosopher Aristotle's famous Doctrine of the Mean and applying it on the macro-level instead of just the micro-level.

In doing so, I hope I can alert you to the immense importance of Aristotle to the cause of freedom and how his philosophical approach compares to that of Ayn Rand and Murray Rothbard.

Why is this so important? Because freedom has always been a fragile orchid in a jungle of rapacious ideologies bent on snuffing its presence out. Freedom requires rational, irrefutable thought to be won and maintained. If we have built our defense of freedom upon a false philosophy with faulty premises, then we are fighting in vain.

This is the paramount question that we as libertarians and conservatives must ask: Have Rand and Rothbard given us an undergirding philosophy of rationality upon which to fight for freedom? Or have we launched a freedom movement upon a ship resplendent in sail, but possessed of a leaky hull and faulty tiller? Are our basic premises rational and irrefutable? Because if they are not, we will lose our fight and will have lived lives of wasted purpose. We will have built nothing but an obscure footnote to history, rather than a formidable force in history. Posterity will laugh at us, rather than revere us.

I have just written a book about all of this titled, *The Golden Mean: Libertarian Politics, Conservative Values*, that I believe gives us a rational and irrefutable means to win the cause of freedom for the future. But not without a wrenching reappraisal of the philosophical ship on which we are presently sailing.

Economist, Mark Skousen, says, "The Golden Mean is an extremely important book that...is destined to be a classic." Best selling author, Robert Ringer, says: "In a world inundated with political / ideological books, Nelson Hultberg's brilliant work...stands apart from, and above, anything I have previously read in this genre."

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So let's begin by examining the political spectrum that I mentioned earlier, and why it is so important in our lives? Everyone, I'm sure, is familiar with the idea of a political spectrum. It's a listing of the world's various political-economic systems on a chart, placing each system on the chart toward the left, middle, or right according to the basic type of government that system upholds.

Here's where the danger lies, though. The political spectrum being taught today in our schools is totally false, and it's being used to discredit the legitimacy of capitalism, and therefore freedom. Here's why.

The notion of a political spectrum with three poles of left, center, and right has come to us as a legacy from Aristotle's idea that virtue consists of the "rational course" that lies between two opposite and natural extremes of defect and excess. This rational course he called the Golden Mean. For example, as Aristotle demonstrates in his famous *Nicomachean Ethics* the chart you see before you.

[Nelson_1](#)

The virtue of courage is the rational mean between the defect of cowardice and the excess of rashness. Ambition is the rational mean between sloth and greed. Likewise with liberality and self-control. These virtues are all means between defect and excess. In other words, good is the wisdom of balance, and evil is when you stray away from the Golden Mean toward one of the two extremes.

There are, of course, many values of life (other than the ones that Aristotle put forth), and these can also be placed upon a spectrum to determine a Golden Mean. Here are a few examples that I have put together over the years:

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You see here the basic triad that Aristotle defined – vice, virtue, vice. Midway between the defect of apathy and the excess of zealotry, there lies the rational balance of CONCERN. Between vulgarity and prudery, there is the mean of DECENCY. And the same thing with all the other triads of value listed here.

What is so beautiful about Aristotle's doctrine is that it shows all the noblest and most desired values of our existence to be means – such as loyalty, faith, love, peace, order, and freedom. All the things we value most in life are “means” between two opposite vices. This is the way reality is constructed. Almost always there is a mean between two evils.

It is this way of thinking that has led to the concept of a political spectrum. By listing the various ideological systems on a left to right chart, one can find the two opposite extremes and then determine the rational course that lies between them.

Unfortunately, however, the spectrum chart has been distorted over the years by American and European intellectuals to make their political bias toward statism look proper and virtuous. For example, here is the way the political-economic spectrum is taught to the great majority of college students today:

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With this picture, students have gotten the idea that both ends of the spectrum are dictatorships (communism on the left and fascism on the right), and that America's democratic welfare-state is the only possible good, for it is the mean between two opposite vices. On the contrary, this spectrum is a serious distortion of reality.

The reason why is that communism, socialism, and fascism are all listed separately here; and they shouldn't be. They are all collectivist dictatorships. So they belong together on the same side of the spectrum. Dictatorship can't be on both sides because you have to have an excess and a defect as your extremes. Dictatorship is an excess of government. Thus you need a defect of government on the other side. You need anarchism on the far right.

Thus the conventional spectrum taught today is not a correct picture. The true political spectrum would be like this:

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The far left of the spectrum is the vice of total government whether it calls itself communism, socialism or fascism. The far right is its exact opposite, the vice of no government or anarchism. The middle is the virtue of limited government (and its economic corollary of capitalism). Welfarism is a semi-capitalist, semi-socialist mixture, and the anarcho-capitalism of the radical libertarians is a semi-capitalist, semi-anarchist mixture.

This is the true political-economic spectrum. There has to be two opposite extremes of evil beyond which one cannot go and then a virtuous middle, or it's simply not a spectrum. It's then just an arbitrary display of various political-economic systems with no rhyme or reason to it, and no capacity to judge any of the systems as right or wrong, workable or non-workable.

Thus, there is no such thing as a "dictatorship of the right" as so frequently declared by our establishment pundits. All dictatorships are of the left! The farther we go to the right on the spectrum, the less government we will have, not more.

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Let's now look at a historical version of the political spectrum, and it should give us a little more clarity. A much more realistic picture of the political spectrum would be its division into the five basic categories we see here:

These are the basic political-economic systems that have existed throughout history ranging from the excess of total government on the far left, to the mean of limited government in the center, to the defect of no government on the far right.

1) Totalitarianism on the far left, is the form of government exemplified by the former USSR, Communist China, Nazi Germany, and Fascist Italy.

2) Welfare-Statism is the form of government utilized in all the Western democracies today such as England, France and America. While these systems are authoritarian and highly centralized, they do not try to totally control our lives. But they are moving in that direction.

3) Constitutional Republicanism is the form of government that the Founding Fathers espoused and which prevailed in 19th century America. Economically speaking it was laissez-faire capitalism, or what is known today as “libertarian-conservatism.”

4) Anarcho-Capitalism is the political system advocated by Murray Rothbard and Bruce Benson. According to these theorists, all functions of the state should be privatized and provided by the marketplace – even the protective functions such as the military, the police forces, and our courts of law.

Thus technically speaking anarcho-capitalists are not anarchists. They don’t want to eliminate the protective government functions; they just want to change them from state provided to privately provided institutions. Consequently they term themselves anarcho-capitalists so as to distinguish themselves from total anarchy. The best historical examples we find of this form of government were the customary law societies of the early Middle Ages.

5) Anarchism on the far right, as we all know, is a pre-civilizational form of social organization where there is no legal framework or government period – just the rule of primitive savagery and chaos. Best described by the philosopher, Thomas Hobbs, as “poor, nasty, brutish, and short life.”

This then is the total political-economic spectrum that makes up reality. You can’t go any further left than communism, and you can’t go any further right than anarchism. All systems fit in between these two extremes of total government and no government.

* * * *

Let’s now delve into the controversies that surrounded both Ayn Rand and Murray Rothbard and which must be understood if we are to develop a successful defense of freedom in the West. As profound and cogent as they were, both Rand and Rothbard were guilty of serious errors in their philosophical approaches. These errors must be corrected; no civilization can be defended with irrationality and contradiction.

To understand this better, let’s take another look at the spectrum from a different perspective:

As we see with this portrayal of the spectrum, all ideological systems, other than laissez-faire capitalism, are either excessive or defective because they evolve into some level of arbitrary law and special privileges. Therefore, capitalism (with its corollary of limited government) is the system that all men should strive for because it is the only system that can maintain objective law – in other words, equal rights for everyone, which is what objective law is.

For example, the very act of moving leftward on the spectrum, away from laissez-faire capitalism into welfare-statism requires the steady destruction of “equal rights.” This is because all welfare-state policies require that special privileges be granted to one group of people at the expense of another group – all policies whether they be cash grants to individuals, quotas to minorities, price controls for corporations, or legislative favoritism to unions – all policies require the violation of equal rights in order to convey special privileges by government.

For example, every time the privilege of a subsidy is granted to a certain individual or group, someone else’s right to their income is destroyed to pay for it. Every time the privilege of an affirmative action quota is granted to a minority group, someone else’s right to free association is destroyed to implement it. Every time the privilege of price controls is established for certain corporations, someone else’s right to trade freely is destroyed in the process.

In other words, privileges and rights cannot be mixed in the same society. They are mutually exclusive. Just as locusts will destroy wheat when they are mixed in the same field, so also will privileges destroy rights when they are mixed in the same society. Thus the conveyance of privileges destroys the concept of objective law, upon which all of freedom is based. And the extent of this destruction is determined by how far to the left one goes on the spectrum.

What anarcho-libertarians miss is that any movement on the spectrum to the right of the Golden Mean would also bring about the destruction of objective law. Instead of the government conveying privileges to its favored factions, though, it would be ruthless warlords seizing privileges for themselves. There would not be one government guided by a Constitution; there would be thousands of private defense agencies throughout America guided by arbitrary rules and private stockpiles of weapons. These private defense agencies would become the warlords.

Unfortunately, the fallacy of anarcho-capitalism cannot be thoroughly demonstrated in a short talk, but I get into this issue much more extensively in my book to show clearly why anarcho-capitalism is irrational and must be abandoned by libertarians.

Hopefully you are now beginning to see the fundamental truth involved in all this: Once government expands to the left or contracts to the right, the concept of “objective law” becomes impossible to maintain. And once “**objective law**” diminishes, the destruction of freedom and order throughout society begins.

It is this point that libertarians and conservatives must grasp fully if they are to understand the political-economic crisis now consuming our country – this powerfully simple fact that there is only one spot on the spectrum where equal rights for all citizens prevail.

This is the genius of the capitalistic society that evolves under a Constitutional Republic: It alone, of the five political categories that make up the spectrum has the capacity to provide objective law for its citizens. This is why it is, and will always be, the only morally proper system of political organization for man.

Once we understand this point – that the mean is the only place where objective law prevails – then a major problem confronting libertarianism is solved, which is Ayn Rand’s controversial Non-Aggression Principle. In other words, her taboo on all initiatory force that she articulated so powerfully in her novel *Atlas Shrugged*.

As Roy Childs and Murray Rothbard demonstrated in the late 1960s, Ayn Rand’s taboo on all initiatory force leads philosophically to anarcho-capitalism. If you can’t initiate force, then you can’t have a government. You must privatize the military, police, and courts of law. This is why most libertarians today have become anarcho-capitalists.

But as we have seen, anarcho-capitalism violates the Doctrine of the Mean and thus it cannot maintain objective law, which is the all-important foundation for freedom. Without “objective law” you cannot have a free society. Thus Ayn Rand’s non-aggression principle and Murray Rothbard’s anarchist politics are serious fallacies.

What is necessary to maintain freedom is not to abolish government, but to restore “federalism.” What is necessary is to combine the Aristotelian mean with the ideas of John Locke and the Founding Fathers. This has never been done before.

When we combine Aristotle’s Doctrine of the Mean with Locke’s contractual theory of limited government, we gain an irrefutability of political theory that has never before been achieved in history, but which is so necessary to fend off the perennial despots of humanity. We fashion the political ideal not just for the 18th and 19th centuries, but for all of time.

Thus it is we, the **constitutional republicans**, who are solidly rooted where truth and freedom reside – in the center at the Golden Mean. It is the “welfare-statists” to our left and the “anarcho-capitalists” to our right who threaten a free society with the extremist evils of total government and no government.

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Let’s now analyze how the Aristotelian mean applies to the basic moral code of civilization, and in doing so I hope to show you where Ayn Rand also went wrong with her ethical ideas.

One of the fundamental points stressed by Rand was that morality is the prime mover of a civilization. Over the long haul, she maintained, we will erect our political-economic structures and cultures according to our moral-philosophical convictions. What is conceived to be the moral ideal will be the primary force that forms the nature of our society.

Contemporary philosophers maintain that there are two primary moral ideals which have motivated men throughout history. They are altruism and egoism.

Two Primary Moral Ideals

ALTRUISM and EGOISM

Altruism is the ethical belief that one's moral duty is to always place the interests of his fellow man above his own. Egoism is the ethical belief that one's moral duty is to always place his own interests above those of his fellow man. In other words, it is the opposite of altruism.

As all libertarians know, Ayn Rand advocated the ethics of egoism, claiming that altruism leads to massive statism and tyranny. Only upon an egoistic moral base, she said, can a free capitalist society be defended. She stated this over and over again throughout her works.

The theme I will present here is that Rand's denunciation of altruism is correct. It is the moral foundation of dictatorship. But her contention that liberty and capitalism must have an undergirding moral base of egoism is totally false. The true code for living on this earth has been established through thousands of years of Judeo-Graeco-Christian wisdom and tradition.

The questions we need to pose are these: Why is altruism supposedly the moral ideal? And most importantly: Are our Judeo-Christian traditions actually based upon altruism? But if altruism is not man's ethical guide, what then is the moral ideal? And why? For only through a clear cut knowledge of what is the moral ideal, can we achieve the proper political structure for man. The ethical ideal helps to define the political ideal.

Well, just as Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean can be used in political philosophy to determine the ideal, such a doctrine can also be used in moral philosophy. The first thing to do is establish the two polar opposites of defect and excess beyond which one cannot go. These would be total self-sacrifice (altruism) on one end of the spectrum, and total self-concern (egoism) on the other end. One is defective concern for yourself, and the other is excessive concern.

According to Aristotelian logic, the ideal social ethics then would be a "rational mean" between the opposite extremes of altruism and egoism. For example:

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The ideal social ethics would be concern for yourself combined with concern for others, or what is known as the Golden Rule, or the Judeo-Christian ethic. The far left of the spectrum is altruism, which is the total lack of concern for oneself that would be found in a pure communist society. The far right of the spectrum is egoism, or the excessive concern for oneself that would be found in a pure anarchist society. These are the two extremes of opposite vice.

The Golden Mean would be the Judeo-Christian ethic as it was practiced in early America, for it taught men, through the wisdom of the ages, what was necessary to maintain their own personal good and to also be concerned with others.

The ideal man is neither altruistic nor egoistic. He is strong, purposeful, self-aware, and self-reliant, yet always possessed of an awareness of other people's interests and a willingness to help those who are incapable of taking care of themselves.

The ideal man would possess the attributes of three great heroes of Western civilization, the lofty and charismatic George Washington, the noble and reverent Robert E. Lee, and the brave paladin Sir Francis Drake. This ideal man would be a composite of George Washington's strength of personality and self-reliance with General Lee's nobility and compassion with Drake's adventurous daring.

The Judeo-Christian ethic then is the "mean" because it is a completely different way of life than being totally wrapped up in one's own interests, or being totally devoted to the interests of others. It is neither of these two. It is a third way – the Aristotelian rational course between the two extremes.

Thus the ancient wisdom, handed down from the Old Testament Hebrews and several other cultures, summed up in Christ's declaration to "Love thy neighbor as thyself," is the proper way of life (i.e., the truth). And it is identical with Aristotle's Golden Mean discovered 2,300 years ago in Greece. This ethical mean is one of the most important manifestations of the natural law that permeates the universe. I like to think of it as the "doctrine of equal concern."

This doctrine is the genius of our Western ethical tradition, or it could be said that this doctrine is its rationality. It praises man's egoistic virtues (such as independence, courage, and productivity), and rewards man for his achievement of them. But it also ties such virtues into a concern with the interest of the other man, which allows men to co-operate with each other through trade and compassionate help, rather than conflict with each other through selfish greed.

So viewed from this rational and historical perspective, both altruism and egoism become highly undesirable. To further verify why this is so, we need only to look at the human personalities that succumb to these two vices.

No one really respects the altruist extreme, the servile Milquetoast who glorifies pacifism and perpetual sacrifice to others. And likewise, no one ever respects the egoist extreme, the callous Peacock who struts through life, insufferably consumed with his own image, accomplishments, and well-being. Both of these extremes, the Milquetoast and the Peacock, are offensive to all of us. This is because neither archetype is possessed of the strength to live equally concerned with others as with oneself.

All the greatest heroes of history from Moses of ancient Israel, to Joan of Arc and William Wallace in the Middle Ages, to the Founding Fathers of 1776, to our modern day entrepreneurs and astronauts – all have been men and women who generated the strength of will to rise above self-absorption, yet never succumb to individual subservience.

Don't misconstrue. Ayn Rand's heroes, such as Howard Roark and John Galt, are certainly not Peacocks. In fact, they're quite admirable characters possessed of numerous noble virtues. But their flaw is that they are ceaselessly concerned only with themselves, even in their charitable ventures, which gives a sort of unbalanced distastefulness to their personalities. As a result, they move on the spectrum toward the egoist extreme and become cold and unfulfilling. They lack that crucial magnanimity found in history's traditional heroes.

Rand purposely created her heroes in this way, because she felt that such an egoistic ideal man was necessary to counter the altruistic ideal man that socialism promoted. But sadly, she could not see that egoism is merely the opposite evil to altruism on the Aristotelian spectrum.

Egoism is not the answer to altruism at all, but merely an over-compensation from excessive concern for others to defective concern. Rand merely replaced one evil with another evil.

Ludwig von Mises, throughout his works, stresses that the entrepreneur's need is to serve the consumer. This is because, in doing so, the entrepreneur serves himself also. This is the ideal social approach for humans to adopt – the morality of equal concern – in other words, the Judeo-Christian ethic.

Howard Roark's way, however, is to create only for his own happiness and sense of accomplishment. The client's needs and desires are of no concern to Roark. In *The Fountainhead* he states emphatically to the Dean of Stanton College, "I don't intend to build in order to serve or help anyone."

It is here that Randian egoism falls short and can never be the ethical foundation upon which to build a movement to restore individualism and freedom, because egoism is not the proper goal of a trader. A trader gets caught up in other people's lives as well as his own. This is the basis of capitalism: serving one's fellow man in order to serve oneself.

In *The Fountainhead*, Roark also makes the statement, "I don't give or ask for help." Is this really the way we should raise our children? Or should we teach them instead to be self-reliant and compassionate both? To say instead, "I intend always to take care of myself, and when I can, I will also help those unfortunate ones who can't quite keep up the pace."

The primary fallacy of egoism as an ethical doctrine then is that it contradicts the Golden Mean, and thus

it violates natural law. Egoism, as a code of morality, is just another attempt to convert an extreme into an ideal and must lead to an emptiness of spirit and meaning in life that is destructive in the long run.

This is Ayn Rand's great mistake! In exposing the impossibility of altruism as a moral code, she has replaced it with the equally impossible code of egoism. But then this is always the problem whenever one strays away from the Golden Mean. Destruction, impracticality, and evil are the results.

Man's code of morality must be RATIONAL, yes. Rand was quite correct in insisting on that. But this is what has been given to us in the Judeo-Christian ethic.

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It's been revered for thousands of years through faith and common sense in all cultures. And as we see now, it is also theoretically validated through Aristotelian logic and the Golden Mean. So it is most certainly a RATIONAL code for humanity. Hopefully you can now see that the Doctrine of the Mean is of the utmost importance in the rise and fall of civilization itself.

In conclusion, Ayn Rand gave libertarianism a spectacular beginning, and Murray Rothbard was certainly a brilliant economist. But the primary philosophical thrusts of these two thinkers are totally wrong for the cause of liberty.

Rand's egoism and Rothbard's anarchism are anathema to capitalism and the vision of the Founding Fathers. We will never defeat the welfare-state paradigm with egoism and anarchism as our guides. Aristotle and the Golden Mean offer us a far sounder philosophical vision.

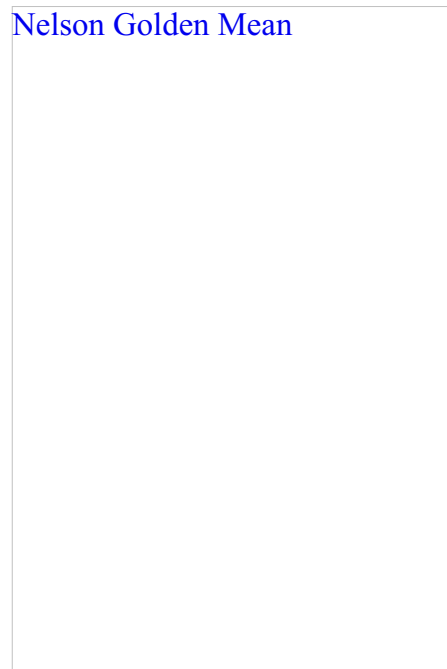
The Aristotelian mean is a spiritual Law of Nature, to which men everywhere are instinctively attracted. Just as all humans must obey the Law of Gravity in the physical realm, they must also obey the Law of the Mean in the intellectual realm.

This law is an imperishable compass that has been instilled into the nature of life by a power far greater than we. It will lead us to almost everything we yearn for. It is our path to the restoration of a free America that the Founders envisioned.

All men and women seek to move toward this mean if only they are told of its existence and taught persuasively how to achieve its implementation in their lives. This then is our task for the 21st century – to lead a demoralized world toward the true political and moral ideal for mankind.

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The Golden Mean: *Libertarian Politics, Conservative Values*, delves into all these issues (and many more) in non-technical language. Copies are available at our website – www.AFR.org. I want to thank you very much for your kind attention. It's been a pleasure speaking to you. I hope that what I have said has been informative.



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