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# Big Sister Is Watching You

*National Review* – December 28, 1957  
By [Whittaker Chambers](https://whittakerchambers.org/about)



Several years ago, Miss [**Ayn Rand**](http://www.aynrand.org/) wrote [*The Fountainhead*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Fountainhead). Despite a generally poor press, it is said to have sold some four hundred thousand copies. Thus, it became a wonder of the book trade of a kind that publishers dream about after taxes. So [*Atlas Shrugged*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlas_Shrugged) had a first printing of one hundred thousand copies. It appears to be slowly climbing the best-seller lists.

The news about this book seems to me to be that any ordinarily sensible head could possibly take it seriously, and that, apparently, a good many do. Somebody has called it: “Excruciatingly awful.” I find it a remarkably silly book. It is certainly a bumptious one. Its story is preposterous. It reports the final stages of a final conflict (locale: chiefly the United States, some indefinite years hence) between the harried ranks of free enterprise and the “looters.” These are proponents of proscriptive taxes, government ownership, Labor, etc. etc. The mischief here is that the author, dodging into fiction, nevertheless counts on your reading it as political reality. “This,” she is saying in effect, “is how things really are. These are the real issues, the real sides. Only your blindness keeps you from seeing it, which, happily, I have come to rescue you from.”

Since a great many of us dislike much that Miss Rand dislikes, quite as heartily as she does, many incline to take her at her word. It is the more persuasive, in some quarters, because the author deals wholly in the blackest blacks and the whitest whites. In this fiction everything, everybody, is either all good or all bad, without any of those intermediate shades which, in life, complicate reality and perplex the eye that seeks to probe it truly. This kind of simplifying pattern, of course, gives charm to most primitive story-telling. And, in fact, the somewhat ferro-concrete fairy tale the author pours here is, basically, the old one known as: The War between the Children of Light and the Children of Darkness. In modern dress, it is a class war. Both sides to it are caricatures.

The Children of Light are largely operatic caricatures. In so far as any of them suggests anything known to the business community, they resemble the occasional curmudgeon millionaire, tales about whose outrageously crude and shrewd eccentricities sometimes provide the lighter moments in Board rooms. Otherwise, the Children of Light are geniuses. One of them is named (the only smile you see will be your own): Francisco Domingo Carlos Andres Sebastian d’Anconia. This electrifying youth is the world’s biggest copper tycoon. Another, no less electrifying, is named: Ragnar Danesjöld. He becomes a twentieth-century pirate. All Miss Rand’s chief heroes are also breathtakingly beautiful. So is her heroine (she is rather fetchingly vice president in charge of management of a transcontinental railroad). So much radiant energy might seem to serve a eugenic purpose. For, in this story as in [**Mark Twain**](http://www.cmgww.com/historic/twain/)‘s, “all the knights marry the princess” — though without benefit of clergy. Yet from the impromptu and surprisingly gymnastic matings of the heroine and three of the heroes, no children — it suddenly strikes you — ever result. The possibility is never entertained. And, indeed, the strenuously sterile world of Atlas Shrugged is scarcely a place for children. You speculate that, in life, children probably irk the author and may make her uneasy. How could it be otherwise when she admiringly names a banker character (by what seems to me a humorless master-stroke): Midas Mulligan? You may fool some adults; you can’t fool little boys and girls with such stuff — not for long. They may not know just what is out of line, but they stir uneasily.

The Children of Darkness are caricatures, too; and they are really oozy. But at least they are caricatures of something identifiable. Their archetypes are Left Liberals, New Dealers, Welfare Statists, One Worlders, or, at any rate, such ogreish semblances of these as may stalk the nightmares of those who think little about people as people, but tend to think a great deal in labels and effigies. (And neither Right nor Left, be it noted in passing, has a monopoly of such dreamers, though the horrors in their nightmares wear radically different masks and labels.)

In *Atlas Shrugged*, all this debased inhuman riffraff is lumped as “looters.” This is a fairly inspired epithet. It enables the author to skewer on one invective word everything and everybody that she fears and hates. This spares her the plaguey business of performing one service that her fiction might have performed, namely: that of examining in human depth how so feeble a lot came to exist at all, let alone be powerful enough to be worth hating and fearing. Instead, she bundles them into one undifferentiated damnation.

“Looters” loot because they believe in [**Robin Hood**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robin_Hood), and have got a lot of other people believing in him, too. Robin Hood is the author’s image of absolute evil — robbing the strong (and hence good) to give to the weak (and hence no good). All “looters” are base, envious, twisted, malignant minds, motivated wholly by greed for power, combined with the lust of the weak to tear down the strong, out of a deep-seated hatred of life and secret longing for destruction and death. There happens to be a tiny (repeat: tiny) seed of truth in this. The full clinical diagnosis can be read in the pages of [**Friedrich Nietzsche**](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche/). (Here I must break in with an aside. Miss Rand acknowledges a grudging debt to one, and only one, earlier philosopher: [**Aristotle**](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle/). I submit that she is indebted, and much more heavily, to Nietzsche. Just as her operatic businessmen are, in fact, Nietzschean supermen, so her ulcerous leftists are Nietzsche’s “last men,” both deformed in a way to sicken the fastidious recluse of [Sils Maria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sils-Maria). And much else comes, consciously or not, from the same source.) Happily, in *Atlas Shrugged* (though not in life), all the Children of Darkness are utterly incompetent.

So the Children of Light win handily by declaring a general strike of brains, of which they have a monopoly, letting the world go, literally, to smash. In the end, they troop out of their Rocky Mountain hideaway to repossess the ruins. It is then, in the book’s last line, that a character traces in the air, “over the desolate earth,” the Sign of the Dollar, in lieu of the Sign of the Cross, and in token that a suitably prostrate mankind is at last ready, for its sins, to be redeemed from the related evils of religion and social reform (the “mysticism of mind” and the “mysticism of muscle”).

That Dollar Sign is not merely provocative, though we sense a sophomoric intent to raise the pious hair on susceptible heads. More importantly, it is meant to seal the fact that mankind is ready to submit abjectly to an elite of technocrats, and their accessories, in a New Order, enlightened and instructed by Miss Rand’s ideas that the good life is one which “has resolved personal worth into exchange value,” “has left no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash-payment.'” The author is explicit, in fact deafening, about these prerequisites. Lest you should be in any doubt after 1168 pages, she assures you with a final stamp of the foot in a postscript: “And I mean it.” But the words quoted above are those of [**Karl Marx**](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/bio/marx/eng-1869.htm). He, too, admired “naked self-interest” (in its time and place), and for much the same reasons as Miss Rand: because, he believed, it cleared away the cobwebs of religion and led to prodigies of industrial and cognate accomplishment.

The overlap is not as incongruous as it looks. *Atlas Shrugged* can be called a novel only by devaluing the term. It is a massive tract for the times. Its story merely serves Miss Rand to get the customers inside the tent, and as a soapbox for delivering her Message. The Message is the thing. It is, in sum, a forthright philosophic materialism. Upperclassmen might incline to sniff and say that the author has, with vast effort, contrived a simple materialist system, one, intellectually, at about the stage of the oxcart, though without mastering the principle of the wheel. Like any consistent materialism, this one begins by rejecting God, religion, original sin, etc. etc. (This book’s aggressive atheism and rather unbuttoned “higher morality,” which chiefly outrage some readers, are, in fact, secondary ripples, and result inevitably from its underpinning premises.) Thus, Randian Man, like Marxian Man, is made the center of a godless world.

At that point, in any materialism, the main possibilities open up to Man. 1) His tragic fate becomes, without God, more tragic and much lonelier. In general, the tragedy deepens according to the degree of pessimism or stoicism with which he conducts his “hopeless encounter between human questioning and the silent universe.” Or, 2) Man’s fate ceases to be tragic at all. Tragedy is bypassed by the pursuit of happiness. Tragedy is henceforth pointless. Henceforth man’s fate, without God, is up to him, and to him alone. His happiness, in strict materialist terms, lies with his own workaday hands and ingenious brain. His happiness becomes, in Miss Rand’s words, “the moral purpose of his life.” Here occurs a little rub whose effects are just as observable in a free enterprise system, which is in practice materialist (whatever else it claims or supposes itself to be), as they would be under an atheist Socialism, if one were ever to deliver that material abundance that all promise. The rub is that the pursuit of happiness, as an end in itself, tends automatically, and widely, to be replaced by the pursuit of pleasure, with a consequent general softening of the fibers of will, intelligence, spirit. No doubt, Miss Rand has brooded upon that little rub. Hence, in part, I presume, her insistence on “man as a heroic being” “with productive achievement as his noblest activity.” For, if Man’s “heroism” (some will prefer to say: “human dignity”) no longer derives from God, or is not a function of that godless integrity which was a root of Nietzsche’s anguish, then Man becomes merely the most consuming of animals, with glut as the condition of his happiness and its replenishment his foremost activity. So Randian Man, at least in his ruling caste, has to be held “heroic” in order not to be beastly. And this, of course, suits the author’s economics and the politics that must arise from them.

For politics, of course, arise, though the author of *Atlas Shrugged* stares stonily past them, as if this book were not what, in fact, it is, essentially — a political book. And here begins mischief. Systems of philosophic materialism, so long as they merely circle outside this world’s atmosphere, matter little to most of us. The trouble is that they keep coming down to earth. It is when a system of materialist ideas presumes to give positive answers to real problems of our real life that mischief starts. In an age like ours, in which a highly complex technological society is everywhere in a high state of instability, such answers, however philosophic, translate quickly into political realities. And in the degree to which problems of complexity and instability are most bewildering to masses of men, a temptation sets in to let some species of [**Big Brother**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Brother_(Nineteen_Eighty-Four)) solve and supervise them.

One Big Brother is, of course, a socializing elite (as we know, several cut-rate brands are on the shelves). Miss Rand, as the enemy of any socializing force, calls in a Big Brother of her own contriving to do battle with the other. In the name of free enterprise, therefore, she plumps for a technocratic elite (I find no more inclusive word than technocratic to bracket the industrial-financial-engineering caste she seems to have in mind). When she calls “productive achievement” man’s “noblest activity,” she means, almost exclusively, technological achievement, supervised by such a managerial political bureau. She might object that she means much, much more; and we can freely entertain her objections. But, in sum, that is just what she means. For that is what, in reality, it works out to. And in reality, too, by contrast with fiction, this can only head into a dictatorship, however benign, living and acting beyond good and evil, a law unto itself (as Miss Rand believes it should be), and feeling any restraint on itself as, in practice, criminal, and, in morals, vicious — as Miss Rand clearly feels it to be. Of course, Miss Rand nowhere calls for a dictatorship. I take her to be calling for an aristocracy of talents. We cannot labor here why, in the modern world, the pre-conditions for aristocracy, an organic growth, no longer exist, so that impulse toward aristocracy always emerges now in the form of dictatorship.

Nor has the author, apparently, brooded on the degree to which, in a wicked world, a materialism of the Right and a materialism of the Left first surprisingly resemble, then, in action, tend to blend each with each, because, while differing at the top in avowed purpose, and possibly in conflict there, at bottom they are much the same thing. The embarrassing similarities between [**Hitler**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/people/adolf_hitler)‘s National Socialism and Stalin’s brand of Communism are familiar. For the world, as seen in materialist view from the Right, scarcely differs from the same world seen in materialist view from the Left. The question becomes chiefly: who is to run that world in whose interests, or perhaps, at best, who can run it more efficiently?

Something of this implication is fixed in the book’s dictatorial tone, which is much its most striking feature. Out of a lifetime of reading, I can recall no other book in which a tone of overriding arrogance was so implacably sustained. Its shrillness is without reprieve. Its dogmatism is without appeal. In addition, the mind which finds this tone natural to it shares other characteristics of its type. 1) It consistently mistakes raw force for strength, and the rawer the force, the more reverent the posture of the mind before it. 2) It supposes itself to be the bringer of a final revelation. Therefore, resistance to the Message cannot be tolerated because disagreement can never be merely honest, prudent, or just humanly fallible. Dissent from revelation so final (because, the author would say, so reasonable) can only be willfully wicked. There are ways of dealing with such wickedness, and, in fact, right reason itself enjoins them. From almost any page of *Atlas Shrugged*, a voice can be heard, from painful necessity, commanding: **“To a gas chamber — go!”** The same inflexibly self-righteous stance results, too (in the total absence of any saving humor), in odd extravagances of inflection and gesture — that Dollar Sign, for example. At first, we try to tell ourselves that these are just lapses, that this mind has, somehow, mislaid the discriminating knack that most of us pray will warn us in time of the difference between what is effective and firm, and what is wildly grotesque and excessive. Soon we suspect something worse. We suspect that this mind finds, precisely in extravagance, some exalting merit; feels a surging release of power and passion precisely in smashing up the house. A tornado might feel this way, or [**Carrie Nation**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carrie_Nation).

We struggle to be just. For we cannot help feel at least a sympathetic pain before the sheer labor, discipline, and patient craftsmanship that went to making this mountain of words. But the words keep shouting us down. In the end that tone dominates. But it should be its own antidote, warning us that anything it shouts is best taken with the usual reservations with which we might sip a patent medicine. Some may like the flavor. In any case, the brew is probably without lasting ill effects. But it is not a cure for anything. Nor would we, ordinarily, place much confidence in the diagnosis of a doctor who supposes that the Hippocratic Oath is a kind of curse.

# The Atlas Shrugged Book Club Begins, Polarized but Polite

* [Atlas Shrugged Book Club](https://web.archive.org/web/20151114045909/http:/www.theatlantic.com/author/atlas-shrugged-book-club/)

* Feb 18, 2013

* [Politics](https://web.archive.org/web/20151114045909/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/)

*In this inaugural edition, one reader is inspired to quit Catholicism; another yearns for a book burning and inquisition; and a third is shocked to discover that the novel was published in the late 1950s.*



[*Read the introduction to the Atlas Shrugged Book Club here.*](https://web.archive.org/web/20151114045909/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/02/calling-all-readers-join-the-atlas-shrugged-book-club/267380/)  
  
**From: Conor Friedersdorf  
To: Michael Brendan Dougherty, Jerome Copulsky, Garance Franke-Ruta**  
**Subject: Part I, Chapters 1 through 5**  
  
Michael, Jerome, Garance:  
  
As a kid, I read *Atlas Shrugged* three or four times, starting in sixth or seventh grade, all while attending Catholic schools in Orange County, California. It was one of my favorite books, and although it moved steadily down my all-time list as I discovered Tolstoy, Hemingway, Nabokov, Dostoevsky, Fitzgerald, and many others, I retain a fondness for it. In fact, I'd recommend reading it once to anyone. Like the Bible, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud, *Atlas Shrugged* offers a radically different way of looking at the world that's worth grappling with at least once. For many, the extremity of its vision is off-putting. Ayn Rand herself always insisted that her work wasn't amenable to partial concurrences. Either embrace it wholeheartedly, she said, or reject it outright.

## The Atlas Shrugged Book Club

[](https://web.archive.org/web/20151114045909/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/category/atlas-shrugged-book-club)

[**Read the entire series on Ayn Rand's controversial classic**](https://web.archive.org/web/20151114045909/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/category/atlas-shrugged-book-club)

What I'll never understand is why sycophants and critics alike so often comply. That isn't an approach that I ever took. I like to think that if you read *Atlas Shrugged* and attend Catholic school, taking the best insights from both, you emerge at the end with a healthy relationship toward guilt.  
  
I've always been surprised by how polarizing the book's early chapters are. Readers meet Dagny Taggart, her unsavory brother, James, her childhood friend, Eddie Willers, and Francisco D'Anconia, my favorite character. The most controversial ideas in the novel all come later. I've nevertheless known people who love this section more than any other, and as many who stop reading after 80 pages, incredulous as to how anyone could press on. It's hard to know how I'd react to Part I, Chapters 1 through 5, if I'd read them at age 33 for the first time. Re-reading, I enjoyed them. And I remember why certain passages appealed to me as a younger man.  
  
Eddie Willers's innocent idealism appealed to me: "It still seemed simple and incomprehensible to him: simple that things should be right, and incomprehensible that they weren't. He knew that they weren't."  
  
His confidence in his convictions did too.  
  
When I first read the book, I was being pressured to get confirmed into the Catholic Church, which I refused to do. I remember speaking at length with a youth minister who hoped to change my mind. He seemed like a phony. There's a passage where Eddie describes a conversation with Jim Taggart, president of Transcontinental Railroad. "He spoke for an hour and a half and did not give me a straight answer," Eddie observed. I remember thinking to myself, "That's the affect my campus minister has!" I didn't need a novel to intuit that he was dodging my questions. But I'd never encountered that sort of manipulation, even on TV or in literature, until chapter one of *Atlas Shrugged*. Reading it reassured me, as all my peers were preparing to be confirmed, that I wasn't alone in perceiving a certain kind of evasiveness that I was right to mistrust. As I read on in the book, I was somehow reassured that I shouldn't feel guilty about refusing to affirm things I didn't believe, even if it would upset a family member or a priest.  
  
Perhaps reading any radical dissent from prevailing social norms at that age would've broadened my notion of what was possible in the world. But I read *Atlas Shrugged*. And what I took from it wasn't Rand's philosophy so much as a feeling of empowerment to formulate my own.      
  
There's so much to discuss in the first five chapters:  
  
The relationship between Hank Rearden and his wife Lilian. The notion of being starved for competence and delighting in finding it. Dagny's reaction -- a noble one, I would argue -- when Dan Conway is put out of business, a passage that refutes the weakest critique of Randian selfishness. Dagny's reaction to her first ball: "The lights and the flowers. Do they expect those things to make them romantic, not the other way around?" The dubious claim that "indiscriminate desire and unselective indulgence were possible only to those who regarded sex and themselves as evil." And how ought we judge the morality of the San Sebastian mines?  
  
(Harshly, I think -- all those "noncombatants" harmed -- though Rand would obviously disagree.)  
  
For now, I'll stick to the themes that have meant something to me personally.  
  
Only once have I frightened myself by thinking like James Taggart. I was a college senior, pondering law school for all the wrong reasons. I hadn't a clue what sort of job I would get after graduation; I'd always excelled in school, gone to a competitive college, graduated with good grades. If I failed at life, what excuse would I have? If I ended up unemployed, living at my parents' house, what would that say about me? The course I thought I'd take up until that moment -- trying to be a newspaper reporter -- suddenly seemed terrifying. What if no one hired me? It was a career path without guarantees. Whereas going to law school suddenly seemed so ... safe. *I may go deep into debt and embark on a career that feels more like a chore than a passion, but I'll guarantee avoiding a certain kind of failure*, I thought. Or as Jim Taggart would put it, "No one can blame me for what's happened. I attended one of the best law schools, a career path generally considered to be worthy of esteem." To which an exasperated Eddie would reply, "Jim, who the hell cares if anyone can *blame* you? This is *your* life!"  
  
I know the "why not law school?" logic I've described sounds insane.  
  
But I've known a lot of people who felt something like that same anxiety -- who were afraid to really try because they might fail. Like a lot of people, I overcame it. I certainly don't give Ayn Rand all the credit. But I definitely thought about that aspect of the novel as college ended, and I pursued the career path that required a bit more courage, foolish idealism, and egoistic confidence that I'd somehow be among the minority of jobless 22-year-olds who'd "make it" in a volatile field. The book offered the negative caricature of the man who wouldn't take responsibility for himself, showing the shamefulness of that attitude. And it romanticized these ambitious characters who believed they'd succeed if they just worked damn hard. There's a [Jay-Z line](https://web.archive.org/web/20151114045909/http:/www.youtube.com/watch?v=WM1RChZk1EU), "World can't hold me, too much ambition, always knew it'd be like this when I was in the kitchen." Wherever you get it, having some of that spirit when you're starting out is important.     
  
There's a variation on the personal responsibility theme later in this section. A railroad crew comes upon a broken signal and halts the passenger train they're running. Dagny happens to be on board:

"If you know that the signal is broken, what do you intend to do?"  
  
"Lady, I don't intend to stick my neck out," he said.  
  
"He means," said the fireman, "that our job's to wait for orders."  
  
"Your job is to run this train."  
  
"Not against a red light. If the light says stop, we stop."  
  
"A red light means danger, lady," said the passenger.  
  
"We're not taking any chances," said the engineer. "Whoever is responsible for it, he'll switch the blame to us if we move. So we're not moving until someone tells us to."  
  
"And if nobody does?"  
  
"Somebody will turn up sooner or later."

You'd be a fool to glean wisdom on romantic love from *Atlas Shrugged* -- not in a world with *Anna Karenina*. But buck-passing is a phenomenon in this world too, and Rand's dramatized  treatment of that subject conveys a truth (even if it doesn't *ring* as true as the treatment of *The Wire's* David Simon, the only other person I can think of who has attempted to address it so directly; he prized verisimilitude, whereas Rand had [unusual theories](https://web.archive.org/web/20151114045909/http:/aynrandlexicon.com/lexicon/sense_of_life.html) about why artistic realism wasn't for her).  
  
My least favorite passage from this section? The description of Nat Taggart, Dagny's grandfather, who "pledged his wife as security for a loan from a millionaire who hated him and admired her beauty," with her consent. Later when I discuss what I don't like about the book, I'll return to it. For now, I cede the floor to you guys -- what did you think about chapters one through five?  
  
Best,  
  
Conor

\*\*\*\*

**From: Michael Brendan Dougherty**  
**To: Jerome Copulsky, Garance Franke-Ruta**, **Conor Friedersdorf**  
**Subject: RE: Part I, Chapters 1 through 5**  
  
Fellow Looters,  
  
What's the most depraved type of human being?  
  
I come to this exercise having never read a single word of Ayn Rand's. I remember when I was in college and began calling myself a conservative people began asking me whether I was going through a Randian phase. So I read a little conservative criticism of Ayn Rand. Easy enough to dismiss, I thought. I accepted Conor's invitation gratefully because I thought perhaps that Ayn Rand can surprise me. And in the first five chapters, she has.  
  
As I began reading, my first thought was that *Atlas Shrugged* was quite like a comic book. The characters were broadly and boldly drawn. They gave you their essence almost immediately. Virtuous characters and things are described as being angular, made of straight lines, tall, and long. The "shape of" Dagny's "mouth clear cut, a sensual mouth." Unvirtuous characters, like her brother, have "shapeless apprehension" or "muscles evading the responsibility of a shape." But by the end of the fourth chapter I had the disturbing thought that I had been reading a parody of an Ayn Rand novel. I double-checked.  
  
Dear God! This really is Ayn Rand's novel! And reading it has filled me with what Rand would doubtlessly call a "shapeless" fear. Conor refers to the "extremity of its vision" as potentially "off-putting". Extremity does not get at what I've found so distressing about *Atlas Shrugged*. "Plainness" is part of it. There is something so insanely simple-minded and affectless about the dialogue and the ideas in this book -- "Francisco, what's the most depraved type of human being?" Dagny asks the young man with whom she is smitten -- that my mind is put instantly into sympathy with the prosecutors of the Inquisition. For the first time in my life I want to burn a book, and the word "Randianism" is now followed in my mind by the phrase, "should be remorselessly suppressed." This book will destroy souls. It provokes in me the most un-libertarian thoughts. Give me Brecht before another word of this! Perhaps the extremity of my reaction is off-putting.  
  
I thought I would save the above reaction for a later time, for fear of sinking this conversation before it is started. But there it is. Also for the first time, I feel the temptation to psychoanalyze the author. More on that later.  
  
This book really does evoke religious thoughts in me. There is a Gnosticism about it. Dagny Taggart, Hank Rearden, Ellis Wyatt, Francisco D'Anconia -- they all spend time speaking to each other in words and concepts that only they seem to understand and accept. Everyone else is completely oblivious to the idea of the profit motive or the appeal of financial success. They are invincibly ignorant in Rand's telling.  And our protagonists hold the dupes, moochers, and looters around them in contempt.  
  
Holding people in contempt is a virtue itself, it seems:  
  
*"Don't show that you're scared Jim," she said contemptuously.  
  
Reardon felt contempt for the groups of that kind and saw no reason for a closer inquiry of their nature.  
  
But an almost unendurable contempt made him close his eyes instead.  
  
When called upon he moved with contemptuous slowness.  
  
She had shrugged, contemptuously amused...  
  
Dagny lived in the future -- in the world she expected to find, where she would not have to feel contempt or boredom.  
  
She was talking to a couple of helpless young men, her face contemptuously empty.  
  
Dagny thought of the party and shrugged in contemptuous reproach at her own disappointment.  
  
[Francisco:] "I am not committing the contemptible act of asking you to take me on faith"*  
  
That's just the first five chapters. And of course, it isn't just the word. Wyatt accuses Dagny, "You expect to feed off me while you can and to find another carcass to pick dry after you have finished mine. That is the policy of most of mankind today."  
  
Well, jeez, when you put it that way. I guess I'm no longer surprised that the Randian sub-culture of libertarianism is unreflectively hawkish. Bomb a moocher, save the world.  
  
In the abstract there would be something admirable about the determination of the heroes.  But it is interesting that Rand sees familial attachment as the enemy of capitalist progress. Of course, historically, capitalism is a kind of acid on tribal societies. But to my mind, the most memorable scene of all in these first five chapters is the scene after Hank Rearden has poured his first round of his new super-metal; his life's work finally hitting the market. He is sitting with his family, and they are entirely uninterested in it. In fact, they hate him. They nag him constantly. They criticize him even as they live off the fruits of his labor and genius. They do not understand him and he does not understand them. They are obstacles and enemies. He almost pities them. In this way, even the simple bourgeois family is made into an enemy of the creative genius of the capitalist.  
  
And this is where my moral differences with Rand seem to be peaking out most violently. Her novel is right that man's creative power is worthy of honor and that this honor is often impugned by the merely self-interested and lazy. What I find so nasty is that she only recognizes man's creative power and his ability to "take responsibility" (notice how everyone but the heroes scrupulously and explicitly avoids responsibility) in these über-capitalists, who bend and shape the world through commerce. That almost all humans are creating all the time -- small things, mostly, but real nonetheless -- seems to be beneath her Olympian notice. And that she contrasts the freedom and potency of demi-god capitalists with the stultifying confines of family is the most perverse from my perspective, because for the bulk of humanity, we most clearly imitate God as creative agents by making children together, and taking responsibility for those children. We co-create souls and have the awesome responsibility of shaping them. The family is the great fiery furnace in which people are forged. The place in my moral universe that is occupied by the manger and the Holy Family is in Rand's world occupied by a bank vault and a teller.  
  
When Dagny is thinking of Nat Taggart, her long-deceased relation, she resents the idea that she owes him something just for having a biological tie to him, but believes that for his virtues as a (presumably Gilded Age) baron she would have chosen him freely as a family member. Rand really can't resist putting that fine a point on it.  
  
And again, there is something adolescent about this worldview that exalts human agency by obliterating all other factors of human life. Dagny, Rearden, Wyatt are all the beneficiaries of their biology, their talents, their intellect, their families, their nations. The text of this book reacts petulantly at the suggestion that property and wealth are a trusteeship, a bundle of resources that others (living and unborn) have a claim on. As a conservative, I suppose I reject the way socialists claim others' property, but as a conservative it is obvious to me that property, the land, and the nation are given to us by law, custom, circumstance, and (yes) some of our own talent at work. That we have a responsibility to use it for our good, the good of our families, and the good of our nation, and to pass it on better than we found it is blindingly obvious and intuitive to me. Even when I've overcome some obstacles, even those put up by members of my own family to achieve success, I tend to feel grateful for what I've been given, not this pervasive Randian contempt at those who through normal human fault incidentally or temporarily impeded my plans.  
  
I wrote earlier that I've been tempted to now psychoanalyze Rand after just starting her book. And perhaps here is where I will finally soften to her, and perhaps this is my gateway into enjoying the rest of this book apart from the above extremities. Critics of Rand famously point out that she accepted government assistance as she became older and ill. This is often reduced to a cheap rhetorical point about her, but it actually makes me sympathize with Rand.  
  
Knowing her circumstances, I'm inclined to believe that *Atlas Shrugged* is a kind of comic book after all. And that Rand's capitalist heroes represent something deeply aspirational for her. And that is one thing I do share with Ayn Rand. I very often daydream of amassing great wealth, of living in luxurious circumstances that demonstrate my superior taste. I suppose my fantasies differ from hers in that I'd also use great wealth for philanthropic causes and try to buy the impression that I'm moral and generous too. I think part of it is that I've often felt economic distress, the humiliation of unemployment and failure without a safety net. So the idea of having not only economic security, but real power and agency is so tempting and so deeply comforting. I can imagine becoming a monster while trying to achieve it and justify that achievement. I'm afraid Rand has become that just in the wishing.  
  
What am I missing?

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**To: Atlas Shrugged Book Club  
From: Kenneth J. Devries  
Subject: Reader E-mail**   
  
Before I begin, I know journalists like disclosure so here is mine:  My wife, Donna Kossy, wrote a book called *Kooks*, about people who are driven to share their Big Idea with the world.  I live in the Kooks Museum and our library holds hundreds and hundreds of books by such people. I have read about half of them and tried to read most of the rest, and the fact is that I have read more of that kind of book, and more different kinds of books, than anybody I have ever met.  I will not be viewing *Atlas Shrugged* with the same eyes as a person who has read only popular fiction, or nothing at all, and abruptly encounters a Novel of Ideas.  I think much of the positive emotion Rand's work engenders is a first encounter effect, a realization that there are books full of things you never thought could even be in a book.  That effect may account for the cult status of such works as *On the Road*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, *Catcher in the Rye*, etc.  
  
My very first thought on reading a few pages of *Atlas Shrugged* was surprise that people can come up with so many bad things to say about Rand as a writer.  The book is a melodramatic fantasy, the protagonist is an ideal and other characters are types and symbols, but it is not poorly written.   
  
I have been reading *Pride and Prejudice* this month and by comparison Rand's characters are no more "laughably shallow" (as they have been described) than Austen's. James Taggart is a type, as are Mr. Collins and the Bingley sisters.  The difference is that in Rand the secondary characters are mostly one type -- moral cowards whose main motivation is to avoid taking responsibility for the results of their actions. While Austen seems utterly unable to write a clear visual description of any kind, Rand's descriptions are vivid and striking, her language strongly emotional and poetic. I am a painter, and the first pour of Rearden Metal filled my mind with burning color.  She depicts the characters' inner state with clarity and intensity. It is only in the extended dialog scenes that my attention wanders.  
  
I doubt that Rand had much of a sense of humor but she does show a skill for fierce satire in her descriptions of character and behavior, and I chuckled with glee at the "most expensive barroom in New York .... built on the roof of a skyscraper,"  made to look like a dingy cellar, and its bartender whose "manner was that of an embittered quack ministering to some guilty disease."  I laughed aloud at the "pyramid of slabs in brownish-purple jackets, inscribed: The Vulture Is Molting."  
  
I didn't research this book before I started, so after reading a few chapters I was startled to learn its publishing date because it seems so much to be addressing the social and technological concerns of the 1930s, not the late '50s. Rearden mentions air freight as a distant future threat to the railroads, and I get more an overall feeling of the anti-technocracy and Bolshevist attitudes of the '30s than the Red Scare '50s when there really wasn't much fear of new technologies.  Notably, "The Atom" as a potential source of power or threat doesn't seem to appear at all, unlike almost all other speculative fiction of that day. In the movie in my mind, the gowns are by Adrian, not Edith Head.  
  
So far, a fairly well written, slightly simplistic and anachronistic, melodramatic bit of Social Science Fiction.  
  
Best Wishes,  
  
KDV

# Atlas Shrugged Book Club, Entry 2: The Emotional Life of People at Work

* [Atlas Shrugged Book Club](https://web.archive.org/web/20151223054245/http:/www.theatlantic.com/author/atlas-shrugged-book-club/)

* Feb 19, 2013

* [Politics](https://web.archive.org/web/20151223054245/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/)

*The exploration continues with a dark prediction, a tribute to Ayn Rand's most subtle rendering, and reader comments.*



Eli Brown/Flickr

*[Entry 1 in this discussion is*[*here*](https://web.archive.org/web/20151223054245/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/02/the-atlas-shrugged-book-club-begins-polarized-but-polite/273256/)*.]*  
**Subject: Part I, Chapters 1 through 5**  
  
Oh exalted ones!  
  
I confess that I am a first-time reader of *Atlas Shrugged*. The only work I have ever read by Ayn Rand is *Anthem*, which I was assigned in the seventh or eighth grade, deep in the Reagan years, and haven't looked at since. At the time I much enjoyed that book; in fact, it's one of the few from those junior high school English classes of which I have any real memory. I think I read that slim volume in one sitting, compelled by the sheer weirdness of the story and the tautness of Rand's prose, and to this day can recall its final, climatic moment -- the annunciation of "EGO." I don't think I was at all taken in by Rand's vision, however, and have never been tempted to pick up one of her other novels or her later philosophical works.

## The Atlas Shrugged Book Club

[](https://web.archive.org/web/20151223054245/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/category/atlas-shrugged-book-club)

[**Read the entire series on Ayn Rand's controversial classic**](https://web.archive.org/web/20151223054245/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/category/atlas-shrugged-book-club)

I come to *Atlas Shrugged*, then, not as a teenager but as an adult. I also come as a student of social and political thought and literature, as someone who has spent many hours reading and thinking and writing about the tradition of political theory in the West, and as someone suspicious of -- indeed, hostile to -- what I know of Rand's ideas about politics, economics, and society.

Over the past few years, as *Atlas Shrugged* has become more and more widely discussed in the media, I have wondered about the novel, its long popularity, and how it serves as a vehicle for and enactment of Rand's peculiar teaching, Objectivism. This is why I am so excited about the opportunity to read and discuss the book in this forum, to attempt take it seriously as a work of fiction and of theory. And I am open to Conor's suggestion that we don't have to accept or reject Rand's work completely. In reading, I will try to follow his advice. But I am discovering that this will be difficult. In fact, though we come from quite different political (and religious) positions, I find myself concurring with Michael's unfavorable first impressions. Many of my comments here will reflect his thoughts.

There is, as Conor says, a lot to discuss in these first five chapters, much of which I admit to finding somewhat slow going. I was expecting a pot-boiler, or at the very least a page turner. I am astonished that Conor has read it three or four times as a grade schooler. (I will not even pretend to think that I would have made it through the novel as a kid!) What I have gleaned so far is that *Atlas Shrugged* is less of a work of literature than a project masquerading as a novel. But I don't think that this is much of a revelation.

Rand's core theme, one that is hammered home on almost every page of the book, is that we are faced with a struggle between the creative, independent individual, who is "the exalted," "the heroic," against what one character calls "the human element," the interests of society, "the looters." This is a book in which "the public" is a parasite, "non-material considerations" are an illusion, and "humanitarianism" a dirty word, perhaps the most filthy of all.

Rand is not at all interested in nuance here; the theme is underscored not only in the speeches but also, as Michael has discussed, etched on the faces and bodies of her characters. It will not be too difficult to tell the heroes and the villains apart in Rand's world. Clearly, Rand does not trust the moral imagination of her readers. And it is clear, too, even in these early pages, that Rand is setting up a Manichean world of light versus darkness, good versus evil, the exalted (and those who recognize them) versus the looters. This is not a book that is interested in exploring the ambiguities of the soul or the vagaries of human behavior. (Hank Rearden may be the most complex, and conflicted, character in these pages, but in Rand's world that's not to his credit.) I'm not going to expect much character development or epiphanies in later chapters.

It is well-known that Rand claimed her only philosophical influence was Aristotle, but given her glorification of the strong and her hatred of the weak and their resentment Rand appears to be an apostle of a crude Nietzscheanism. Though she doesn't use the phrase, what Rand is enacting with her enlightened, progressive, public spirited businessmen like Jim and even Dan Conway is the triumph of a "slave morality" over that of the master, the strong and virtuous. (To see what I mean, take a look at the first essay of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*.) I suspect I'll have more to say about this in future posts.

As Michael has eloquently mentioned, this theme of the position of the individual against a group comes across most powerfully in Rand's suspicion of solidarity, in particular of familial relations and commitments. Consider chapter two, titled "The Chain," which narrates the inventor and entrepreneur Rearden's relations with his wife, Lillian, mother, and brother, Philip. Nearly the entire chapter is devoted to showing how Rearden is abused and exploited by his family members who fail to appreciate his virtues while living, parasitically, off his successes. Poor Rearden, Rand seems to suggest, doesn't have the wherewithal to deal with this lowly band of moochers they way they ought to be.

Compare Rearden's family troubles with Dagny's attitude towards her grandfather a few pages later, a passage worth citing in full:

Dagney regretted at times that Nat Taggart was her ancestor. What she felt for him did not belong in the category of unchosen family affections. She did not want her feeling to be the thing one was supposed to owe an uncle or a grandfather. She was incapable of love for any object not of her own choice and she resented anyone's demand for it. But had it been possible to choose an ancestor, she would have chosen Nat Taggart, in voluntary homage and with all of her gratitude.

Well, okay. But it would do Dagny right to remember that Nat was indeed her ancestor and that she is in fact an *heiress*. As that other great Randian creation, the seemingly rakish Francisco D'Anconia, is an heir to a copper-mine fortune. Granted, some of Rand's heroes are indeed "self-made" men, so far as it goes (I kept wanting to shout, "You didn't build that!"), but it is indeed curious that her two protagonists just so happen to be born into the families they would chose if they could. How fortunate for them indeed!

And then there is the idealistic young Eddie Willers, Dagny's loyal assistant, with whom the novel opens. So far in the novel, Eddie seems less a character than a type; his role, I suspect, is to display the kind of deference that the masses should show to the great. (I also suspect that he may be madly and impossibly in love with his "childhood friend," Dagny. We'll see if that suspicion is borne out. I kind of hope so, though it would be too bad for him for he is clearly not her type.) Eddie, of course, is not a brilliant individualist, but he knows one when he sees one, and is respectful of such power. He is the good company man, competent, knowing his place, and committed to his master. Consider what Eddie ponders as he walks into Jim's office: "Taggart Transcontinental, thought Eddie Willers, From Ocean to Ocean -- the proud slogan of his childhood, so much more shining and holy than any commandment of the Bible." Really, Eddie? Comparing the slogan of the railroad to the Bible? Regarding it as shining *and* holy? Here is a man who spends his nights sitting in the employee cafeteria baring his lonely thoughts to an anonymous railway worker. I suspect that many young readers like this novel because they fancy themselves like one of its heroes. The fact, however, is that their true role model is Eddie Willers.

Yet, I think we should watch out for this Eddie. On the first page he has already shown himself susceptible to the sin of charity. Could he be tempted over to the dark side? Young idealists sometime fall hard.

Anyway, we'll just have to wait and see. But as I alluded to earlier, this is a novel with an ideology to promote. That it does so threatens to make the work didactic and tedious, which does not bode well for the next 1,050 pages. Oh, well. As any of Rand's characters might say, *Who is John Galt?*

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**From: Garance Franke-Ruta  
To: Michael Brendan Dougherty, Conor Friedersdorf, Jerome Copulsky**

**Subject: Part I, Chapters 1 through 5**

I come to Ayn Rand having heard and read of her for many years through the voices of those she has influenced, but without ever having read her books previously. Within the first pages of *Atlas Shrugged*, I felt immediately plunged back into eighth-grade literature class. There is something about her prose that is fantastically mid-century, like an old painting you find in a thrift store that's been rendered interesting only because painted in a style that has passed out of fashion -- at once all visual cliches and ones no one uses anymore, indelibly and forever of its vanished moment.

Rand is at her most interesting in describing the emotional life of people at work. She is a scholar of the office and displays the mid-century fascination with bureaucracy and the malign power of large institutions to suppress the extraordinary individual (although in her rendering the extraordinary individual is not an ethnic minority, but an intellectual one -- none too surprising a topic given what intellectual elites suffered at the hands of totalizing governments last century, and what she saw as the Bolshevik Revolution upended her native Russia). Though acts of management and creative obsession are much chronicled from the outside in literature, very little I've read quite describes with the skill she does the difficulty of paying attention to other people that attends being completely wrapped up in a project, when bringing yourself back to the mundane matters of daily existence feels like trying to keep a helium balloon under water.

The scene where Rearden comes back to his house after having overseen the first pouring of Rearden Metal, the stronger, lighter-than-steel material whose production stands as testament to his whole career, displays her keen sensitivity to temperaments focused to the point of distraction -- something I suspect is also her describing the writer's temperament. Her description of Rearden's walk home in the dark from the plant and his buoyant sense of accomplishment along the way show a gift for describing the pleasures of achievement, and is very subtly done. But his clash with his wife and mother and ne'er-do-well brother once he arrives at home had me feeling I'd been plunged into a scene from *The Women*, or some other stagey black-and-white theatrical drama featuring female characters as anachronistic and stereotypical (in retrospect) as her portrait of the Rearden metalworks themselves. Perhaps her background as a Hollywood screenwriter is on display in this passage -- it's certainly written like a period parlor scene.

I want to focus on this domestic tableau in particular, however, because within it we see revealed something I am starting to find fascinating about Rand's work: her horror of domesticity and femininity, and her revulsion towards the weakness and softness that have so often been seen as feminine characteristics. All things evil in Rand's book are shapeless, soft, sagging, formless, loose, and baggy. All good things are angular, hard, decided, firm, outward-oriented. As well as, so far at least, clear-skinned, square-jawed, and blond. Her writing is so clearly the writing of a woman in rebellion against everything feminine and small and tame, it's really quite extraordinary. She writes from within and yet does not name what is one of the central problematics of contemporary womankind -- woman's struggle to wrest herself from the downy discomforts of expectation and will herself into a world that fails to grasp her as she sees herself.

Rand's vision of the misunderstood hero is of course appealing to adolescents -- but it's also the central narrative of women of action in novels from the late 18th century on.

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**To: Atlas Shrugged Book Club  
From: Various Readers  
Subject: Reader E-mail**

What I am most grateful for in *Atlas Shrugged*, when I think about having read it as a teenager, is Dagny Taggart's departure from the traditional female sex role. Her role model of independence, and of setting & striving for her own individual goals, was a breath of fresh air. Such role models were in short supply during my childhood and teenage years, growing up female in the 1950s.

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The writing is more philosophical than I recall from when I first tried to read this. Both Dagny and Rearden are compared to the Old Testament God: Dagny repeatedly says "I am" (Ex 3:14) when asked if she is willing to take responsibility in Chapter 1. Rearden's factory in Chapter 2 is introduced with "It began with a few lights," recalling the first three verses of the Bible's "In the beginning... let there be light." No messing around here: they are the Creator.  
I remember the contempt for government, but I didn't remember the contempt for business executives. The idea that engineers like Dagny could run the world better without "suits" is common. It is wrong, and it is discussed in detail in the book [*The Geek Gap*](https://web.archive.org/web/20151223054245/http:/www.amazon.com/Geek-Gap-Technology-Professionals-Understand/dp/1591024153). In *Atlas Shrugged*, Rearden and Dagny, an inventor and an engineer, go ahead without the executives: they make decisions and put together a contract in Chapter 4, without anyone else. That is a common fantasy among technically-minded workers. From *The Geek Gap*: *it's... hard for geeks [read: engineers] to see the skills involved in raising money or managing. "Oh, it's all about who you went to prep school with and how good you are at golf," they say.*

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With Rand's recent increased visibility I have watched with interest so many efforts to write about her ideas without being marked by the taint of association with them. Just as so many essays and columns in late 2001 began with a recitation of the formula, "Though I decry the

tragic fate of the victims of the 9/11 attacks, still ...", any writing about Rand must, it seems, begin with a ritual of denunciation.   
  
One must not be mistaken for "one of THEM."

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One basic, quick observation: To understand Rand's fiction, you must understand that you are reading Cold War polemic, written by a survivor of collectivism, at a time when it was not at all clear that capitalism was going to be the winning system.

# Atlas Shrugged Book Club, Entry 3: Enjoying the Smutty Parts

* [Atlas Shrugged Book Club](https://web.archive.org/web/20151221220604/http:/www.theatlantic.com/author/atlas-shrugged-book-club/)

* Feb 25, 2013

* [Politics](https://web.archive.org/web/20151221220604/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/)

*Part I, Chapters 6 through 10: Readers encounter an eventful party, a career triumph, a torrid affair, and more.*



Frank Pierson/Flickr

**From: Jerome Copulsky  
To: Michael Brendan Dougherty, Conor Friedersdorf, Garance Franke-Ruta**  
**Subject: Part I, Chapters 6 through 10**

A society anniversary party, crashed by a worthless playboy. The construction of a new railway line and bridge out of an untested new metal. A torrid affair (finally!) and a road-trip vacation. The accidental discovery of a fantastical new invention and a quest to find its inventor. And a climatic act of self-sabotage. A lot happens in chapters six through 10. And we're still only in the first third of the novel! We've got a long, long way to go!

Despite all of this action, *Atlas Shrugged* is fundamentally an attempt at a philosophical novel, and one that places professional philosophers themselves in small but important roles. Indeed, the chapters under discussion are more or less framed by a contest of philosophies, which underlies the plot of the novel itself.

## The Atlas Shrugged Book Club

[](https://web.archive.org/web/20151221220604/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/category/atlas-shrugged-book-club)

[**Read the entire series on Ayn Rand's controversial classic**](https://web.archive.org/web/20151221220604/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/category/atlas-shrugged-book-club)

In chapter six, we encounter at the Rearden's anniversary party one Dr. Simon Pritchett, head of the Department of Philosophy at the once prestigious Patrick Henry University, pontificating on the new philosophy. Take a moment to consider some of his weighty pronouncements:

"Man's metaphysical pretensions," he said, "are preposterous. A miserable bit of protoplasm, full of ugly little concepts and mean little emotions -- and it imagines itself important! Really, you know, that is the root of all the troubles in the world."  
  
"The philosophers of the past were superficial .... It remained for our century to redefine the purpose of philosophy. The purpose of philosophy is not to help men find the meaning of life, but to prove to them that there isn't any."  
   
"Reason, my dear fellow is that most naïve of superstitions. That, at least, has been generally conceded in our age."  
  
"The purpose of philosophy is not to seek knowledge, but to prove that knowledge is impossible to man."

Such statements read like a parody of philosophical nihilism, and Pritchett and his interlocutors appear as pseudo-intellectual strawmen, but I think that Rand is dead serious in passages such as these. Deluded by their celebration of irrationality, by their mysticism, by their belief that the universe is a contradiction, Pritchett and his ilk regard the human being as a mere animal, or worse, as a worthless collection of chemicals.

Dr. Pritchett, we soon learn, is the author of *The Metaphysical Contradictions of the Universe*, a tome recommended by Jim Taggart of all people. "You think a system of philosophy -- such as Dr. Pritchett's -- is just something academic, remote, impractical?" Jim asks his new paramour a few chapters later. "But it isn't. Oh, boy, how it isn't."

Even Jim realizes that one's philosophy, one's understanding of the nature of the human being and of one's place in the universe, shapes his actions and morality. This is one of Rand's points: Theory and practice are intimately linked. It is a point underscored by the fact that Francisco d'Anconia, the pirate Ragnar Danneskjöld, and a mysterious third (I wonder who he can be!) all majored in both philosophy and physics -- thought and action -- at Patrick Henry.

You can imagine Rand thinking, *The philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point, however, is to change it.*

I think Rand is correct, though, in implying that there is a fundamental connection between one's anthropology -- one's understanding of the nature of the human being -- and the social and political order than one advocates.

What are the implications of Dr. Pritchett's system, as Jim understands it? "Unhappiness is the hallmark of virtue. If a man is unhappy, really, truly unhappy, it means that he is a superior sort of person." Suffering is the essence of being. It's clear where Rand thinks the philosophy of Pritchett is taking us. At the party, he tells his listeners that "Once [man] realizes that he is of no importance whatever in the vast scheme of the universe, that no possible significance can be attached to his activities, that it does not matter whether he lives or dies, he will become much more ... tractable."

(That little ellipsis -- it is Rand's -- is doing a lot of work, isn't it?)

The assault upon reason leads to the degradation of the human being leads to slavery.

But there is an alternative. Towards the end of chapter 10, following up on the trail of the mysterious inventor of a radically new kind of motor, Dagny seeks out a remote roadside diner in the Rockies to see the man behind the counter. Enjoying a excellent hamburger,

She studied the man behind the counter. He was slender and tall; he had an air of distinction that belonged in an ancient castle or in the inner office of a bank; but his peculiar quality came from the fact that he made the distinction appropriate here, behind the counter of a diner. He wore a cook's white jacket as if it were a full-dress suit. There was an expert competence in his manner of working; his movements were easy, intelligently economical. He had a lean face and grey hair that blended in tone with the cold blue of his eyes; somewhere beyond his look of courteous sternness, there was a note of humor, so faint that it vanished if one tries to discern it.

As it turns out, the distinguished-looking cook behind the counter is none other than Professor Hugh Akston, the scholar who preceded Pritchett as head of the Department of Philosophy at Patrick Henry.

Dagny immediately recognizes the name, and what is stands for:

"Hugh Akston?" she stammered. "The philosopher? ... The last of the advocates of reason?"  
  
"Why, yes," he answered pleasantly. "Or the first of their return."

Dagny is shocked to find such an eminent mind working behind the counter at a little diner in the middle of nowhere. When she asks why his is doing his, he says simply, "Because I am a philosopher."

We don't hear much from Hugh Akston about his philosophy and its implications at this point in the novel, and it will take us some time to learn the reasoning behind his decision. (I actually found it refreshing that he didn't go off on a several-page-long monologue.) We are left to wonder what would cause the great philosopher to leave his university position and work as a short-order cook. As Rand would put it, what is his *motive*? And what are the last advocates of reason advocating ...? Well, we'll just have to read on and see. (I expect many more long speeches on the subject, by the way.) And we will have to judge Rand's novel not only on its artistic merits (of which I am still dubious), but also on the coherence of the philosophical system it is developing and endorsing.

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**From: Michael Brendan Dougherty  
To: Jerome Copulsky, Conor Friedersdorf, Garance Franke-Ruta**  
**Subject: Part I, Chapters 6 through 10**

Maybe it is just the smutty parts but I'm starting to enjoy this book now.

I've gotten used to the way the heroes and villains speak to each other about enterprise. And although everything is overdrawn, I found some of the ideas in these chapters more congenial. I do agree with Rand's heroes that truth and freedom go together. (I would, wouldn't I?) And I do agree that the endless manipulation of language enables tyranny. But of course that would be Rand the libertarian in league with me the reactionary, and Orwell the socialist. So maybe it isn't saying much.

I'm sure that the sex in *Atlas Shrugged* has been panned as badly as the ideology, but when Hank Rearden and Dagny Taggart finally throw down, I actually admired Rand's description of the event as prose. Sex seems like the impossible thing to write. And Rand has set up two incredibly peculiar characters who happen to be demigods in her moral vision. I thought the scene was racy enough and constrained enough. Unfortunately, in the next chapter Hank immediately killed the mood for me by talking again. The pleasant narration gave way to this absurd soliloquy:

"I want you to know this .... What I feel for you is contempt. But it's nothing, compared to the contempt I feel for myself .... I wanted you as one wants a whore -- for the same reason and purpose. I spent two years damning myself, because I thought you were above a desire of this kind. You're not. You're as vile an animal as I am. I should loath my discovering it. I don't. Yesterday, I would have killed anyone who'd tell me that you were capable of doing what I've had you do. Today, I would give my life not to let it be otherwise, not to have you be anything but the bitch you are. All the greatness I saw in you -- I would not take it in exchange for the obscenity of your talent at an animal's sensation of pleasure."

And he keeps talking! For paragraphs more on end.

Hank doesn't feel guilty bending metal to his will, just Dagny's body.

Hank's own reaction to his sexuality is intriguing. He hates the very physicality of it. Up to this point the interactions of Rand's super-capitalists has been something very like the interaction of angels. They are pure light and rationality. And although their tone may seem cold, it has a lightness and efficiency about it.

But Hank thinks of himself as degraded -- entirely servile -- when it comes to sex. And what he thinks of Dagny is almost worse.

What Rand is driving at with the monologue does seem to contain an insight. Hank expresses it very powerfully. "It is a desire that has reduced my mind, my will, my being, my power to exist into an abject dependence upon you -- not even upon the Dagny Taggart whom I admired -- but upon your body, your hands, your mouth and the few seconds of a convulsion of your muscles."

Even Arthur Dimmesdale could not preach a sermon on sex-shame so well. There is, I think, a dark and shameful pleasure in reducing a fully realized "she" into a means for "it." This is the definition of "objectification," and Hank understands that it enslaves the objectifier too. If only he could learn to love his wife.

Dagny ends up being a real sport about it all, laughing, and explaining why she doesn't feel so bad, even offering: "You'll have me any time you wish, anywhere, on any terms." By this point the characters are pretty far from the hard bargains that they have been making everywhere else. "I'm much more of an animal than you think .... If I'm asked to name my proudest attainment, I will say: I have slept with Hank Rearden. I had earned it." So different from the monomaniacal desire to create products, to dominate the market, and to keep working. The capitalist fever is broken for a moment and the two decide to go on a road trip.

As for the business end of things, instead of spending so much time feeling contempt for their close family members, the heroes are now holding in contempt the press, Washington, perverted science, and crony capitalists. Well, what's to get upset about? Those are about as bad as Rand says.

With Dagny's offer hanging in the air, I can see why early adolescent Conor returned again and again to this text. (Just joshing!)

\*\*\*\*

**To: Atlas Shrugged Book Club  
From: Various Readers  
Subject: Reader E-mail**

Here is what few actually get about Ayn Rand that so appealed to me -- her Objectivist philosophy was not at all about rejecting emotion as irrational as so many male philosophers had, it was about demanding *rational* emotion -- that the values you say you hold and espouse are embodied and enacted by your emotional responses in love and sex as in everything else you claim to value. This is the most radical of all her claims -- that human beings can and should be "objective" about their own subjectivity .... She had the nerve to venture into that whole other space -- human interaction -- that solitary male philosophers throughout history had tended to avoid. She did not completely succeed, but she stirred up something deep that still demands real thinking.

\*\*\*\*

Speaking of superheroes, Dagny's power is the ability to identify magic motors from a lump of metal and a drawing. I have significant training in physics and am an engineer by profession, and no "report" would be sufficient evidence of utility. Nor can I imagine my assessment of a plan for a comparable power device, a nuclear-fusion reactor, without weeks of study. If Dagny is so confident in her abilities, I have some perpetual-motion-machine plans to sell her. This is, philosophically, the book's biggest flaw to me: Even in the world of motors and machines, the "right thing" is never so easily judged. And what won't work in motors, won't work in ideas either.

What seems fundamentally missing here is a founding idea of capitalism: acceptance of failure. The Dagny who sinks all her family's money into a mythical motor that never ends up working is a far more believable tale of what makes America great than the Dagny who can do everything and hates everyone but her cool, rich, sexually creative boyfriend.

\*\*\*\*

The protagonists have absolutely no idea how to live in the real world. Rearden and Taggart are surrounded by a corrupt system which is defeating them at every turn, yet they continue to do exactly the same things that are not working. They have money to lay down cash for labor, materials, whole factories, yet their decades-old corporations don't seem to have an advertising department. People are being bought out from under them by people who could be easily bought themselves if our heroes could pull their heads out of their own rectitude long enough to learn how to work the system to their advantage. Their stock prices are crashed by crude propaganda ploys but they never think of mounting a propaganda campaign of their own. Dr. Stadler tells Dagny exactly how to do it: "Men are not open to truth or reason. They cannot be reached by a rational argument. The mind is powerless against them. Yet we have to deal with them. If we want to accomplish anything, we have to deceive them into letting us  
accomplish it. Or force them."  
  
What does Dagny do with that knowledge? Nothing. Her construction project is halted by a single fraudulent and meaningless non-statement from the Science Institute and how does she respond to it? She doesn't.  
  
Here is what you do, Dagny -- issue a detailed point-by-point response to the statement exposing the meaninglessness of every phrase, stating that Stadler himself denied having read or signed it - just to have as a reference, not because it will be widely read. Then start an advertising campaign under the slogan TOMORROW IS ON TRACK, with brightly colored  
illustrations of an ideal future featuring streamlined locomotives shining blue-green rails. Never mention Rearden Metal. Appeal to the emotions without making any concrete statement. Show shadowy forces trying to rip up shining greenish-blue rails, under the slogan DON'T LET THEM STEAL YOUR FUTURE. Print beautiful posters, and newspaper supplements in the form of a children's story or a comic book. Make shining greenish-blue rails the symbol of wealth, health and happiness. Make anyone who doesn't love shining greenish-blue rails the lowest scoundrel and villain who wants to rob your children of their happiness and future. Just try it for three months and send me my consulting fee after you see it working.

# Atlas Shrugged Book Club, Entry 4: How Their World Is Like Ours

* [Atlas Shrugged Book Club](https://web.archive.org/web/20151221094741/http:/www.theatlantic.com/author/atlas-shrugged-book-club/)

* Feb 26, 2013

* [Politics](https://web.archive.org/web/20151221094741/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/)

*After the financial crisis, many people perceived likenesses between the novel and current events. They weren't wrong.***Conor Friedersdorf  
To: Michael Brendan Dougherty, Garance Franke-Ruta**, **Jerome Copulsky**  
**Subject: Part I, Chapters 6 through 10**  
  
My Fellow Shruggers,  
  
What I wouldn't give to tag along with Francisco d'Anconia to a Washington, D.C., cocktail party. Too often, Ayn Rand characters make their points with lengthy, repetitive speeches that unfold over many paragraphs and give the reader too little credit. But d'Anconia has a wonderful talent for pithy one liners that knock interlocutors off guard even as they provoke thought. "We need a national subsidy for literature," Balph Eubank says. "It is disgraceful that artists are treated like peddlers and that art works have to be sold like soap." To which d'Anconia retorts, "You mean, your complaint is that they *don't* sell like soap?" With his zings aplenty, produced as if on command, he best embodies an irrepressible mischievousness that many of Rand's heroes possess and exhibit in smaller quantities. Sometimes I think that quality is their most human and likable.

## The Atlas Shrugged Book Club

[](https://web.archive.org/web/20151221094741/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/category/atlas-shrugged-book-club)

[**Read the entire series on Ayn Rand's controversial classic**](https://web.archive.org/web/20151221094741/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/category/atlas-shrugged-book-club)

Why a Washington, D.C., cocktail party? As I reread this section, I couldn't help but agree with the masses who snapped up copies of the book as the economy crashed: It isn't as if the plot directly parallels real-world events, of course, nor do I see flashes of the heroes in any contemporary figures, but many of the pathologies on display are plagues in our time. Crony capitalism is the most obvious example. It isn't hard to imagine a Randian villain who ran a Wall Street firm that was bailed out in accordance with how much value it destroyed rather than how much it created, nor is it hard to imagine a Jim Taggart or Orren Boyle type putting together [the Abacus deal](https://web.archive.org/web/20151221094741/http:/www.reuters.com/article/2010/04/16/us-goldmansachs-abacus-factbox-idUSTRE63F5CZ20100416).

If only the Tea Party had mimicked Rand's example and held rent-seeking CEOs up to as much scorn and moral outrage as their enabling pols and bureaucrats. (This is a good time to note my previous posts on how Paul Ryan, who's [been called](https://web.archive.org/web/20151221094741/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/08/stop-calling-paul-ryan-a-randian/261363/) a Randian, [more closely resembles an *Atlas Shrugged* villain than a hero](https://web.archive.org/web/20151221094741/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/08/if-paul-ryan-were-an-atlas-shrugged-character-hed-be-a-villain/261036/).) And then there's Dr. Robert Stadler. As he permitted the use of his name for a statement the truth of which he did not know and had good reason to doubt, to Dagny's consternation, did anyone else think of Colin Powell and his U.N. speech?

Here's Stadler channeling Dick Cheney or Michael Bloomberg -- take your pick:

Men are not open to truth or reason. They cannot be reached by rational argument. The mind is powerless against them. Yet we have to deal with them. If we want to accomplish anything, we have to deceive them into letting us accomplish it. Or force them. They understand nothing else.

If I could purge one unspoken attitude from the minds of politicians and pundits, that might be the one I'd choose. I suppose some readers believe that attitude to be far less pervasive than I think it is, and are therefore less convinced than me that Rand has captured something true in that passage. She so often articulates what she takes to be implicit in actions or arguments, which can come off as either penetrating or idiotic straw-manning, depending on whether you think she's right.

Naturally, I am enamored of Dagny's insistence that Stadler is obligated to speak up with the truth *merely because it is true*, though I don't know of anyone in government who behaves that way.

There is, finally, the Washington man: "Rearden wondered, for awhile, why he heard no word from Wesley Mouch. His calls to Washington remained unanswered. Then he received a letter consisting of a single sentence which informed him that Mr. Mouch was resigning from his employ. Two weeks later, he read in the newspapers that Wesley Mouch had been appointed Assistant Coordinator of the Bureau of Economic Planning and National Resources." In a novel of exaggerated, unambiguously immoral villains, the portrayal of the Washington insider is spot on.

A few stray observations:

* I question Rand's decision to juxtapose Hank and Dagny's tryst with Jim's impromptu date. "The hint of desire that he felt was no more than a sense of physical discomfort," she writes of Jim. "He admitted to himself that she was a much better person than Betty Pope, perhaps the best person ever offered to him. The admission left him indifferent. He felt no more than he had felt for Betty Pope. He felt nothing. The prospect of experiencing pleasure was not worth the effort; he had no desire to experience pleasure." Are we to take from this that Hank would've been an inferior person if he hadn't have wanted to sleep with Dagny?
* I liked Hank's confusion at why the Metal board honored him, having covered my share of awards banquets held for reasons I could never quite discern for people who didn't enjoy them.
* "A brood of ragged children had gathered at the door behind the woman ... they stared at the car, not with the bright curiosity of children, but with the tension of savages ready to vanish at the first sign of danger." Noted because it's the first time I can recall children appearing in this book.
* I much prefer Wyatt torching his property to d'Anconia's treacherous San Sebastian mine project, given that the latter involved misleading a lot of innocent third parties -- workers who relocated there, for example.
* True or false: "The same kind of brain can't do both. Either you're good at running the Mills or you're good at running to Washington."

# Atlas Shrugged Book Club, Entry 5: The Money Speech and the Pirate Ship

* [Atlas Shrugged Book Club](https://web.archive.org/web/20150921084910/http:/www.theatlantic.com/author/atlas-shrugged-book-club/)

* Mar 6, 2013

*Discussing Part II of Ayn Rand's dystopian novel*



Dmerti/Flickr

**From: Jerome Copulsky  
To: Conor Friedersdorf, Garance Franke-Ruta, Michael Brendan Dougherty  
Subject: Part II**

After slogging through nearly 700 pages now, I've come to the conclusion that *Atlas Shrugged* would have benefited much from the services of a good, ruthless editor. If something is worth saying once, for Rand it is worth repeating again and again. And again. And, what the heck, again again. Even the casual reader cannot fail to get the point. And there is, Michael, [not nearly enough good sex in this thing](https://web.archive.org/web/20150921084910/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/02/atlas-shrugged-book-club-entry-3-enjoying-the-smutty-parts/273456/)! In short, I'm finding it overwrought and an overbearing read. Rand particularly enjoys having her characters speechify, which may be a way for her to express the details of her ideology, but in a work of fiction -- one which purports to be a romance and a mystery -- it is increasingly tedious. As I suggested, it appears that Rand doesn't trust her readers to draw their own conclusions from her characters and narrative.  They must be told, over and over, about the virtue of the self-interested industrialist and the evil of the looters and their system.

## The Atlas Shrugged Book Club

[](https://web.archive.org/web/20150921084910/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/category/atlas-shrugged-book-club)

[**Read the entire series on Ayn Rand's controversial classic**](https://web.archive.org/web/20150921084910/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/category/atlas-shrugged-book-club)

Francisco D'Aconia might be fun to run into at a cocktail party, Conor, until he got you in a corner and delivered an interminable lecture on the nature and glories of money. At that point, I wouldn't blame you if you excused yourself to get another gin and tonic. I like him better in his guise of "worthless playboy" than as a sincere (and chaste, as it happens) apostle of Randianism.

But these ideas are what the novel is all about, so in Part II we get treated to a number of disquisitions, particularly on the notion of the sanction of the victim, which Francisco explains to Hank at length, and which Hank then goes on to repeat to the court. According to Rand, it is the capitalists who are the world-historical victims, and they have willingly participated in their own destruction by giving their sanction to the morality of their oppressor. And now things are coming to a head. As Francisco tells Dagny later on as he tries to convince her to join the strike, "Our age is the climax of centuries of evil. We must put an end to it, once and for all, or perish -- we the men of the mind. It was our own guilt. We produced the wealth of the world -- but we let our enemies write its moral code."

Unite, boys! You have nothing to lose but your chains.

But such is the nature of Rand's world, where it is the producers who are exploited and the unappreciated and meek have already inherited the earth. Frankly, I am astonished by the level of resentment that Rand's heroes express, not only about their current economic situation, but also about what they regard as the debased condition of capitalists throughout history.

I mean, really, Francisco. Your people have had it pretty good. Buck up, man. (As a side note, I'm struck by how often Rand's characters, too, are "astonished" in reaction to something or other -- when they aren't feeling contempt or indifference, of course. It strikes me as a kind of tic, a go-to word -- disclosing I think, a kind of laziness of psychological imagination.)

Yet, as one ponders this Randian complaint, one wonders if things are really all that simple.  Sure, in *Atlas Shrugged* Rand has created a dystopian world, full of crony businessmen, power-hungry bureaucrats, and "People's States," where the virtuous capitalist finds him or herself always on the defense, hated, oppressed, and abused. But is it the case that the moral code of the world has always been stacked against him, against production and commerce? I'm more than a bit skeptical. At some point in my reading, I really wanted to tell Francisco to shut up for a moment and hand him my copy of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic* *and the Spirit of Capitalism*, for starters. Clearly, he should have steeped out from under the clouds of Professors Akston and Stadler and taken a broader set of courses at Patrick Henry University, perhaps a few in modern history.

Francisco's (that is Rand's) own lack of historical awareness comes across in passages of uncritical celebration of America. For example, in his sermon on money, Francisco exclaims that "to the glory of mankind, there was, for the first time in history, a country of money -- and I have no higher, more reverent tribute to pay to America, for this means: a country of reason, justice, freedom, production, achievement. For the first time, man's mind and money were set free, and there were no fortunes-by-conquest, but only fortunes-by-work, and instead of swordsmen and slaves, there appeared the real maker of wealth, the greatest worker, the highest type of human being--the self-made man -- the American industrialist."

Later on, another character remarks to Dagny that the United States "was the only country in history where wealth was not acquired by looting, but by production, not by force, but by trade, the only country whose money was the symbol of man's right to his own mind, to his own work, to his life, to his happiness, to himself."

No "fortunes-by-conquest"?

Rand's characters imagine an America born pure and pristine, without violence, without seizure, without slavery. This is simply a delusion of the first order. Ms. Rand, I have a few books for you to take a look at as well.

But it is in the train disaster at the end of chapter seven where Rand most powerfully discloses the ugly flip side of her celebration of man. Her point -- that incompetence and buck-passing lead to this kind of catastrophe -- is well taken, but her catalog of victims is shot through with real hatred. There is a display of Schadenfreude in these pages, as Rand suggests that all of these people were mere looters who met with their just desserts. And Schadenfreude, as another philosopher has taught, is not a noble virtue.

**From: Michael Brendan Dougherty  
To: Conor Friedersdorf, Garance Franke-Ruta, Jerome Copulsky  
Subject: Part II**

After my first entry into this book club, I've all but given up the notion of evaluating Rand's unique ideas -- her particular contribution of Objectivism -- and am instead finding myself softening to her just so slightly. Of course the dialogue is terrible and interminable. And I can't help but agree with Jerome that Rand's imagination of America seems to go back only to the Edenic Vanderbilts and stretch toward the Satanic New Deal. But the exaggerations of her morality and her style that I [described as like a comic-book in the first entry](https://web.archive.org/web/20150921084910/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/02/the-atlas-shrugged-book-club-begins-polarized-but-polite/273256/) increasingly seem to me to fit into the general dystopian novel genre and maybe the 20th century more generally.

The premise of other dystopian novels are often just as striking. The mottos and slogans shouted in *1984* are just as sharply evil as anything in Rand. The speeches in Rand's book, though immensely longer, are not so different from the pages upon pages of Party propaganda in Orwell's work. The mathematical dystopia of egalitarian efficiency in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* is just as inhuman and contemptible as any horror of the People's States herein described. And why shouldn't these novels be drawn this sharply? The geopolitics of Rand's era are, I think, becoming distant enough from our own as to become slightly unrecognizable. Whatever is left of an "intelligentsia" in the West argues about "austerity" vs. "stimulus" -- in reality these figures barely register when measured in GDP. In Rand's time, serious intellectuals talked openly about liquidating classes, nations, religions, and fomenting revolutions that would alter human nature itself.

And even in the 1980s, a close relative of mine visited the Soviet Union. He remembers the workers at a restaurant answering his requests for more water with a sighing "Nyet." So even if Jeff Allen's account of the Twentieth Century Motor Company's fall into dysfunction and corruption is overdrawn and scorchingly moralistic, well, Rand is right about the wrongs of Communism, even if her Objectivism is revealing itself to be almost as disgusting, since it seems to treat every needy human as a wrecker of civilization and progress.

Rand's useless moochers, especially Hank Rearden's family and some of his "competitors" and those officials urging him to comply in the confiscation of his life's work, are barely even ideologues at all, especially compared to the protagonists. "Give and take. Give in and take in. That's the policy of our age -- and it's time you accepted it," another in the endless parade of lazybones bilkers urges Hank.

Even when Rearden is threatened that his refusal to give up will mean embarrassment for Dagny, I couldn't help but think how much lower the stakes were than for Orwell. No torture, and no forced betrayal on the level of "Do it to Julia!" For our other dystopians the future was a boot stamping on a human face forever. For Rand, it is Rearden's mother nagging him incoherently for several more hours.

But then there's the magical counter-looterutionary pirate. You have to give Ayn credit for baldly stating that this reverse Robin Hood is no more silly than an anti-capitalist government.

There are reams to be written about [d'Anconia's famous Money speech](https://web.archive.org/web/20150921084910/http:/capitalismmagazine.com/2002/08/franciscos-money-speech/). He says that money is not created by guns at the head. I'm pretty sure it is, actually. The Fed's credibility seems to be based on the presumed military strength and social cohesion of the United States. He's a goldbug, of course.

But I found this interesting:

Did you get your money by fraud? By pandering to men's vices or men's stupidity? By catering to fools, in the hope of getting more than your ability deserves? By lowering your standards? By doing work you despise for purchasers you scorn? If so, then your money will not give you a moment's or a penny's worth of joy. Then all the things you buy will become, not a tribute to you, but a reproach; not an achievement, but a reminder of shame. Then you'll scream that money is evil. Evil, because it would not pinch-hit for your self-respect? Evil, because it would not let you enjoy your depravity?  
  
Is this the root of your hatred of money?

At least for a moment it seems one of Rand's heroes is really opening up a possibility for an evil kind of capitalism that isn't a form of cravenness to the state, but rather a cravenness about human nature. Can a Randian look down on capitalists who make money off vice? Or am I missing something in what Rand is implying here?

# Atlas Shrugged Book Club, Entry 6: Dagny Taggart and Her Pre-Feminist Train Wreck

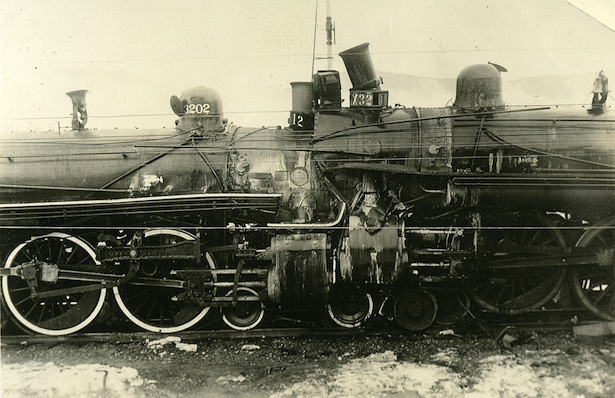
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* [Atlas Shrugged Book Club](https://web.archive.org/web/20160320155527/http:/www.theatlantic.com/author/atlas-shrugged-book-club/)

* Mar 8, 2013

* [Politics](https://web.archive.org/web/20160320155527/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/)

*The discussion continues with a violent love triangle, an imperiled heroine, and more ...*



**From: Garance Franke-Ruta  
To: Conor Friedersdorf, Michael Brendan Dougherty, Jerome Copulsky  
Subject: Part II**

Two thirds done! I will admit I flipped ahead to the next page after the end of Part II and was thrilled to discover it was finally time to introduce John Galt as a character, right there at the start of Part III on page 644 of the 50th Anniversary Edition (Signet, publisher). Not since *Tristram Shandy* has an author taken so long to introduce a central protagonist into a novel.

I'll also admit to turning to the Internet for some supplementary materials to sort out what was going on. I read *Middlemarch* in two days; I have a strong stomach for long books and normally just read them straight through until they are done (before binge Netflix watching, there was binge reading). But I have found myself having trouble sticking with *Atlas Shrugged*, because of Rand's Objectivist literary style, which after hundreds of pages can feel as weighty and graceless as a [Yugoslav monument to World War II](https://web.archive.org/web/20160320155527/http:/www.amazingworldonline.com/2012/10/abandoned-world-war-ii-monuments-and.html).

## The Atlas Shrugged Book Club

[](https://web.archive.org/web/20160320155527/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/category/atlas-shrugged-book-club)

[**Read the entire series on Ayn Rand's controversial classic**](https://web.archive.org/web/20160320155527/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/category/atlas-shrugged-book-club)

But once I had my Wiki guide to the unfolding of the plot to come, I suddenly realized that one reason the book compels is that so much is explained at the end that you kind of have to go back over earlier passages to really get them, or to get them fully. To be really grasped, the 1,069-page book has to be read more than once. But that also means that when read cold by a first-time reader is can seem plodding, and confusing, and maybe even slightly pointless.

Fortunately, the endless talk of railways, ambitions, the looters, and the disappearances is leavened by a healthy dose of sex scenes and minor disquisitions about sexuality morality in Part II.

I love reading pre-feminist descriptions of these sorts of things, much in the same way I love reading memoirs written in pre-Freudian times, because it is so interesting to see how people constructed themselves and interpreted the events of their lives before the advent of contemporary ideologies and conceptions of self.

Rand continues to be a real outlier for her era in this regard, writing in the voice of Dagny Taggart of her first love: "He taught her every manner of sensuality he could invent .... They were happy and radiantly innocent. They were both incapable of the conception that joy is sin."

That's still a pretty radical view here in the 21st century (hello, [Purity Balls](https://web.archive.org/web/20160320155527/http:/en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purity_ball)). Later, during Dagny's affair with married man Hank Rearden, she tells him, "Hank, I knew you were married. I knew what I was doing. I chose to do it. There's nothing you owe me, no duty that you have to consider .... I want nothing from you except what you wish to give me .... So long as you wish to remain married, I have no right to resent it."

Is that the voice of liberation or one of the long-standing compartmentalizations characteristic of the mistress mentality? Hard to say. But again, Rand makes her female protagonist an outlier -- an adulterer -- and paints Rearden's marriage as a sham. They may have a shared a problem with stringent divorce laws, but we're a long way from *Jane Eyre* here.

Dagny also argues with Hank when he presses her to confess the identity of her first love, which she refuses to disclose, telling him: "You've never accepted my wanting you, either -- you've never accepted that I *should* want you, just as I should have wanted him, once."

So Rand, the anti-romantic, turns out to be a great defender of female sexual autonomy and desire.

One final note: In my readings I came across [this article](https://web.archive.org/web/20160320155527/http:/www.troynovant.com/McElroy/Rand/Paradigm-Darkly.html) by a Canadian feminist who indicates that the Rand sex scenes were apparently a matter of grave controversy in the 1970s. I hear things get more edgy in Part III, but while what goes on in Part II is not all flowers and gentleness, it seemed such an unremarkable set of descriptions, I was really shocked to discover there was any historic controversy about them at all.

**From: Conor Friedersdorf  
To: Garance Franke-Ruta, Michael Brendan Dougherty, Jerome Copulsky  
Subject: Part II**

Thomas Jefferson famously sat down with his Bible and cut out the passages that he judged to be wise. Sometimes when I read *Atlas Shrugged*, I have a similar impulse -- every so often I highlight a paragraph I particularly like, and as often I have the urge to cut something out. I would actually love, Jerome, to have a go at being the editor that you say the book needs. If the estate of Ayn Rand would allow it, I'd have a painstaking go, release my own version for public perusal, and debate it merits. (I have a feeling that's something her estate would never allow.)

A good editor could certainly pare down various philosophical passages, like Francisco's money speech, without losing anything. A more activist editor might also make some of the most glaringly didactic dialogue seem a bit less so without losing the meaning. But I must say that the excessively repetitive passages, even the length itself, doesn't seem to have *cost* Rand. What I mean is that the book is successful, beloved, and influential beyond the wildest expectations any novelist could reasonably have when putting pen to paper. Could it be improved upon? Sure. But if she sought to create a novel as a vehicle for her ideas, she succeeded wildly on her own terms. And while that doesn't stop me from wishing it reached the aesthetic perfection of *Lolita* (the novel) or *The Graduate* (the film), I am enjoying the book yet again. In the parts where Rand wants to move the action forward she's quite adept at it. And I think that Garance is on to something when she speculates that it might be easier on second read.

(Full disclosure: I skip the redundant parts of the speeches. And spoiler alert: heretical as this will sound to hardcore *Atlas Shrugged* fans, I fully recommend skipping much of the speech that appears in Part III, even if it's your first time reading the book. Once you figure out you've come to it, safe enough to turn the page a bunch of times before you actually start reading again.)

I suppose it's those redundant, excessively lengthy, and excessively didactic bits that causes people to call Rand a bad writer. But I must say that when she isn't deliberately doing those things I find the writing quite enjoyable: the prose clean, the imagery evocative, the inner thoughts and feelings of the main characters interesting (save James Taggart, about whom I have mixed feelings). Most of all, it is original, which is saying something. I think Michael is absolutely right when he says that the book shares certain characteristics with other dystopian novels, but my favorite parts of*Atlas Shrugged* are the ones that render the world through a lens unlike the one used by any other writer. Sometimes I find those passages inspiring, other times thought-provoking, and still other times I find them wrongheaded, or (rarely) morally repugnant.

That harshest judgment is what I attach to the infamous passage describing the passengers who died in the tunnel and their complicity in their own demise. I understand why Jerome perceives Schadenfreude. My main complaint is a bit different. There's a lot of talk from Francisco about the gravity of the mental errors Dagny makes -- the way she is enabling the looters. Apart from that, Hank Rearden gets various things of his own wrong over the course of the book. He beats himself up pretty good over the speech he gave Dagny after they first slept together. So why aren't any likable characters described dying on the train as the just consequence of their decadence enabling mental mistakes? I'll bet that would've tamped down on the seeming Schadenfreude.  
       
Other stray thoughts:

* I wonder, Garance, if the 1960s and 1970s businessmen who read and loved *Atlas Shrugged* experienced a change in their attitudes toward women, or women in business, as a result. If there are any readers with relevant personal experience I'd very much like to hear it. Lots of women have already written telling me how much the book spurred their feminism.
* For all her absolutism about right being right and wrong being wrong (and destructive and evil), Rand really glorifies Hank and Dagny for not giving up, for staying and fighting, even though she regards Francisco as being in the right. I am not sure if that is a small contradiction in the novel or a sign that it's more complex than it is generally credited as being.  The case that it's problematic: why should it be so that Hank, who is presented as more heroic than even Ellis Wyatt, who is beloved for his mind by Francisco and Ragnar alike, should take longer to figure out the right thing to do than all the other lesser men who disappeared? It seems so unRandian to suggest that virtue would render you *less* able to arrive at the truth.
* Interesting that through two parts of the book, as society crumbles around them due to bad governance, none of the characters ever, you know, runs for office, or backs a candidate in whom they believe, or tries to persuade their fellow citizens that they ought to vote for different people. Every industry has its lone hero, but not journalist or politician or public intellectual... which is notable in part because Rand both supported politicians and was a public intellectual who dedicated her life to persuasion. Perhaps it just didn't fit the plot? Or is there more to it?
* The lack of any noble politician, or notion that there might be one, is of a piece with the larger weakness, mentioned by my discussion partners, of the ahistorical veneration of America as a place of honest traders, as if it was never tainted by the seizure of Native American land or the slave trade or Jim Crow. All that is absent from America as presented in *Atlas Shrugged* (written during Jim Crow), as is the fact that America was founded by slave-owners turned politicians who, for all the genius of their statesmanship, did not preside over anything resembling a libertarian society, even setting slavery aside.
* Characters in the book are always taking small actions as mental salutes to one thing or another. In that spirit, Michael, Garance, and Jerome, I now nod my head in solemn tribute to your participation.
* At almost every point in the novel when the main characters undertake some consequential action, Rand painstakingly describes their thought process, sometimes excessively. Yet in the passage where Dagny hears about the disaster in the Taggart tunnel and rushes back toward civilization, there is no account of why. We're just meant to understand it -- and we do, it's a fine writerly choice, just an interesting one since it contrasts so noticeably from Rand's norm.
* Eddie Willers is a curious character.
* It seems to me that, just as the aesthetic flaws I've mentioned allow critics to cast Rand as a generally poor writer, despite all the good passages, the plot points like the tunnel disaster that are described as morally monstrous permit critics to evade grappling with the merits of various passages and ideas -- to dismiss the whole book without offering any argument against much of it, and then posturing as if it's all self-evidently unserious to cover their dearth of due diligence. To bookend my entry with mentions of the Bible, it would be like getting to Leviticus, reading about the most monstrous legal rules proscribed, and dismissing the whole religious tradition because of it, as if it somehow obviates Proverbs. (Understand that I am not suggesting a direct analogy -- it would be more forgivable to dismiss all of *Atlas Shrugged*, it being a single novel, but I still think it would be a mistake.) It doesn't help that some of the book's fans insist that IT HAS NO FLAWS DAMN YOU.
* The scene where Francisco restrains himself from defending himself against Rearden is another fascinating one. When it comes to the book's heroes, so much more mercy is given! "Within the extent of your knowledge, you are right," Francisco says. The benefit of that doubt is seemingly never extended to people who haven't achieved extreme success in business. That observation aside, that seems to me a very capably executed love-triangle-is-discovered moment. All three people behave in a way that is true to the characters we've gotten to know.
* So who do you want Dagny to end up with, Rearden or Francisco?

# Atlas Shrugged Book Club, Entry 7: The Impotent Irrationality of John Galt

In the final, climactic part of Ayn Rand's novel, the mysterious John Galt gives his big speech. But is it revelatory or ridiculous?

* [Atlas Shrugged Book Club](https://web.archive.org/web/20150919181931/http:/www.theatlantic.com/author/atlas-shrugged-book-club/)

* Mar 22, 2013

[](https://web.archive.org/web/20150919181931/http:/cdn.theatlantic.com/static/mt/assets/politics/assets_c/2013/03/colorado%20flickr%20az%20adam-116692.php)

AZ Adam/Flickr

*The Atlas Shrugged Book Club will conclude early next week with entries by Conor Friedersdorf and Garance Franke-Ruta. Meanwhile, email your final thoughts on Part III of the book, or the novel as a whole, to conor dot friedersdorf at gmail for possible inclusion in the last round.*

**From: Jerome Copulsky  
To: Conor Friedersdorf, Garance Franke-Ruta, Michael Brendan Dougherty  
Subject: Part II**

The crux of the *Atlas Shrugged*, the core of Rand's project, is John Galt's famous 60-page speech (roughly double the length of *The Communist Manifesto*), which can be regarded as a philosophy lecture or Objectivist sermon or Randian rant, depending on your point of view. In it, Galt presents his rationale for the strike -- a removal of sanction from the inverted morality of the "mystics" -- and his call to those to withdraw their support from the system, to join the strike themselves.

He thus ushers in the novel's *Götterdämmerung*.

## The Atlas Shrugged Book Club

[](https://web.archive.org/web/20150919181931/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/category/atlas-shrugged-book-club)

[**Read the entire series on Ayn Rand's controversial classic**](https://web.archive.org/web/20150919181931/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/category/atlas-shrugged-book-club)

It is right to focus on the speech, for, as I have previously mentioned, the novel is merely the vehicle for the message. (And, as we read in the "About the Author" statement, Rand means it!) Throughout the address, Galt depicts a world-historical contest of moralities, a battle between good and evil, life and death. (No shades of gray here.) On the side of darkness there are the mystics of spirit and the mystics of muscle, who would force individuals to serve a god or their neighbor; they are really two sides of the same coin; they are those who "preach the creed of sacrifice" and are "haters of man."

And then there is the side of goodness and light.  Opposed to the parties of mystics are those like Galt himself, who regard man as a rational being, and whose morality is to serve oneself only. Reason, Rand asserts, leads to purpose and self-interest, which is the essence of virtue, and true human happiness. "Happiness," he explains, "is that state of consciousness which proceeds from the achievement of one's values" and is one's "highest moral purpose." Such a state of being is "possible only to a rational man." And the highest of such man is the productive genius, such as Galt himself. In this world, all human relations become transactional, commercial, as seen in the Randian utopia of Galt's Gulch, where even borrowing your buddy's car for an afternoon will cost you. "There are no conflicts of interest among rational men," Galt confidently remarks at one point. "When I disagree with a rational man, I let reality be our final arbiter." Galt's embrace of this true morality leads him to his political stance, an endorsement of a minimal state:

The only proper purpose of a government is to protect a 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 contract from breach or fraud, to settle disputes by rational rules, according to objective law.

The myriad problems raised by such a conception of a state should be obvious to anyone who thinks seriously about politics and property and power. In the rough and tumble of the real world, things are rarely as simple as Galt imagines them to be. There is, first of all, the question of what is meant here by "force," and what it means to commence with it. But one can then ask about the how the power of defense is to be organized; how big the military should be; who constructs the roads and bridges that it will use; how to regard the externalities of human activity such as, say, pollution; what should be the method of paying for such protection.

The problems go on and on.

I want to note, however, that Galt regards this as a description of America's original political system, which he hopes to reestablish. I was rather struck by the notion that Rand's project was essentially restorative, that she saw a perfect coincidence between her ideas and the Founders. I trust that many readers find this claim preposterous. For starters, Galt states that America's system was founded on the premise "that man's life, his freedom, his happiness are his by inalienable right." This language is undoubtedly a paraphrase of the Declaration of Independence, but with a significant omission. For Jefferson, of course, people are endowed by their Creator with "certain unalienable Rights." (It's also worth mentioning that Jefferson saw the pursuit of happiness as one of these Rights, whereas Rand seems to have made happiness a right unto itself.)

There is, however, no room for a Creator God in Rand's materialist universe. Rand never indicates how human beings come to be, but it is clearly not from some beneficent Judeo-Christian deity. Rand also rejects the idea that rights are established by human convention, granted by states or by law. So from where, then, do such rights originate? Perhaps sensing this problem, Galt/Rand states that "Rights are conditions of existence required by man's nature for his proper survival." There is a lot packed into that sentence -- what is meant by "conditions of existence"? What is human nature? What is his "proper survival"? -- but although Galt drones on for hours (the text says for three, but I suspect that his speech would have gone on for much longer), he does not, to my mind, clear up these matters to any satisfaction. The claim about the origin of rights is simply asserted, not demonstrated. (In fact, this is my overall feeling about Galt's speech: "Reason" is used more as a rhetorical device -- to force the reader to submit to its positions -- than as a mode of argumentation.) I suppose someone with more patience for this book than I have could wade through Galt's muddled metaphysics and establish just how "the law of identity" leads to property rights, but remember that, in the plot of the novel, Galt's speech was a revolutionary act meant to inspire his listeners, undermine the regime of the looters, and usher in the reign of the Galtians; it was not a text to be brought to the seminar room and pored over by graduate students, but a call to arms. Or rather, a call to drop out.

Since I brought up human nature, there is also the matter of the thinness of Rand's anthropology. Rand's basic assertion is the rationality of human beings. (To the extent that a person is irrational, he is regarded as evil, anti-mind and anti-life.) And it is this conception of the human being as a rational, thinking being which leads to her ideal of the productive genius, his happiness, and the political order that would protect and preserve it. For Rand, the state only exists to shield the rational from the irrational, the good and the strong from ravenous desires of the wicked and the weak.

Of course, other rationalists have drawn strikingly different conclusions. In this regard, it useful to note that much serious political philosophy proceeds from a completely different premise -- the imperfect rationality of human beings -- and rightly so. If one considers Hobbes, say, or Spinoza, or Locke, three of the thinkers who inaugurated modern liberalism, one will notice that the fundamental problem of social life is that human beings are driven by their passions and their imaginations, by their hopes and their fears. It is these passions that create the problems and tensions that point to the need for stable political organization. While it is reason that leads them to enter into civil society -- to escape from the inconveniences of the state of nature -- the political order arranged is one that must take human beings as they are and not as the best they could be. This could be an authoritarian state, as it was for Hobbes, or a liberal democracy, as it was for Spinoza. In both cases, however, there is the recognition that human beings are passionate creatures, that the state is needed because of the problems inherent in human nature, that these problems may be alleviated somewhat in civil society but they won't go away.

Ironically, when one mulls it over, one may find that it's Galt and his band of strikers and dropouts who prove to be driven by their passions. Galt especially, who, despite his ultra-handsome looks and heroic self-understanding, can't muster up the gumption to just go up to the woman he has a massive crush on and ask her out for a drink -- or at least just talk to her -- and instead sits around chatting up her poor, love-struck assistant, hoping to catch a glimpse into her life.

Is this rational action, heroic action?

No, I think not. And aside from being somewhat creepy, it underscores the true impotence of Rand's hero. And it's not only with Dagny. When faced with the "communist" takeover of the motor factory, Galt doesn't seek out the banker Midas Mulligan and ask for a loan so that he can develop his motor on his own or attempt a run for political office; he just takes his toys and goes into hiding, hoping by such action to help hasten the apocalypse. This seems to me to be more like the behavior of a petulant adolescent than of the "highest man." Galt longs for a total transformation of human society, a complete victory for his higher morality and the unconditional surrender of those who oppose him, and he is content, indeed happy, to watch everything be destroyed to get there.

Despite all of their speeches and protestations, the protagonists of this book are not so much stern rationalists but romantics.

And the attempt to flee from reality courses through Rand's novel, from the disappeared and the destructive activities of Francisco D'Anconia and Ragnar Danneskjöld to Dangy's fruitless affair with Hank to the libertarian fantasyland of Galt's Gulch. Despite all of their speeches and protestations, these people are not so much stern rationalists but romantics. Such characters make terrible role models for those of us who are forced to reside in the world, which just may not be the stage for the struggle between the looting mystics and heroic individuals, but a place infinitely more complex, and more interesting. (Also, we should keep in mind that it is people convinced of their superior rationality and gnostic insights into the direction of world-historical change that generally pose the greatest challenge to the stability of the political order.)

It is worth remarking, too, that there is no sense of tragedy, no sense of the ultimate fragility of existence, in Rand's work. Her heroes regard suffering as something unnatural and unnecessary, and happiness as the only rightful condition of man. It is a strangely sterile world, one without sickness or disease or disability, where failure (in business) is merely an incentive to greater striving, and death takes only the villains, the marginal, or the vast unnamed. Rand's heroes are unencumbered by finitude, however. They strive to overcome "the contradictory, the arbitrary, the hidden, the faked, the irrational in men," to recover, as Galt himself says, the spirit of their childhood. There is a word for people who try to escape from the contradictory, the arbitrary, the irrational and tragic dimensions of life that we all must face--that word is delusional.

**From: Michael Brendan Dougherty  
To: Conor Friedersdorf, Garance Franke-Ruta, Jerome Copulsky  
Subject: Part II**

Bill Buckley once said he thought Whittaker Chambers had gone too far when he wrote in his review of this book, "From almost any page of *Atlas Shrugged*, a voice can be heard, from painful necessity, commanding: 'To a gas chamber -- go!'" I've been reading the book with an eye toward Chambers' judgement.

Shortly after we are introduced to John Galt, he solemnly intones these words: "Ever since I can remember, I had felt that I would kill the man who'd claim that I exist for the sake of his need -- and I had known that this was the highest moral feeling."  
  
So, Chambers was right. And I hate to be the outside-it-all religious one here, as always, but this really is a repulsive thing to put as the highest moral feeling. This is John Galt talking about the looters and moochers, the takers. Shiftless employees, socialists, etc. His long speech is fascinating; it is also so humorless. None of these heroes has any lightness of spirit. They are so leaden. Galt eventually addresses his inferiors as "you who dread knowledge" and shortly thereafter informs them "You have nothing to offer us. We do not need you ... Are you not crying: No this was not what you wanted?"  
  
And I really wonder where the disabled, the sick, the ignorant, and all manner of humans fit into Ayn Rand's vision. These of course are the people that will starve first under the strike of the abled. So while violence is officially abjured by these Objectivists, you do get this sick sense reading the text that Randians would love to just execute a load of "inferior" people. What is a palsied man but a perpetual taker? Give him a bullet, he takes no more. This is never made explicit, but the feeling of it just oozes from everywhere.  
  
And yet again, there is a small something in me that wants to excuse these excesses. The Soviet Union really did do monstrous things to achieve its plans, using brute force, show trials, and the most insane sort of economic planning. And Rand's own escape from Russia to America has to be a part of her narrative of the super-capitalists withdrawing their talent from the monster state. Her talents were not drafted in service of that corrupt and deformed worker's state. I find her impression that some people like a tyranny depressingly convincing.  
  
But the sympathy ends. John Galt at one point explains how to fix a torture machine currently being used on his own body, in order to destroy the torturers. And when he gives his blessing to the new world he is about to build, he makes a dollar sign in the air. I haven't [burned the book](https://web.archive.org/web/20150919181931/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/02/the-atlas-shrugged-book-club-begins-polarized-but-polite/273256/), but I did throw my iPad down into a cushion at this exact point.  
  
I couldn't agree more with the point Jerome makes about the shallowness of Rand's anthropology. You get pleasure and pain, joy or suffering and that's it. Men of reason don't disagree? Who are these men of reason? Even if we accepted all of Rand's premises, Reardon, Dagny Taggart, and even John Galt himself seem absolutely transported and taken (with themselves) at times. My own view is that enterprise and competition are necessary evils. I think it helps man to remove himself from the commercial sphere as much as he can, and it is obvious that this is what some of the "men of the mind" want this for themselves as well. Some of those in Galt's Gulch are effectively retired on their riches.  
  
Naturally, Galt rants against the one Christian doctrine that is essentially proved by a reading of history: Original Sin. It is said to be a "cowardly evasion" that man is born with free will but with a tendency to evil. Galt rejects this idea, dismissing it by saying that it makes men like loaded dice. And yet, everything we know from psychology, sociology, sociobiology, history, and self-reflection tells us that we want shortcuts, we want power, we are burdened by our genes, our upbringing, our social environment, and that these are powerful forces, though we often feel at the same time that they are not determinative. And business is not rational. Even the best businessmen favor their friends and family; they favor those like them. They do not come to some reasonable conclusion about the wages of their employees, and the employees do not come to reasonable conclusions. They fight, cajole, prey upon, and exasperate one another in negotiations. If so many humans can be taken in by a lying morality, one so obviously fraudulent and tyrannical, why you might think there was something a little warped about human nature, no?

# Atlas Shrugged Book Club, Entry 8: Is Ayn Rand a Better Philosopher or Novelist?

In the final installment of our discussion, Conor Friedersdorf and Garance Franke-Ruta debate the merits of the controversial book's moral.

* [Atlas Shrugged Book Club](https://web.archive.org/web/20151221094745/http:/www.theatlantic.com/author/atlas-shrugged-book-club/)

* Mar 29, 2013

* [Politics](https://web.archive.org/web/20151221094745/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/)

[](https://web.archive.org/web/20151221094745/http:/cdn.theatlantic.com/static/mt/assets/politics/assets_c/2013/03/train%20full%20black%20and%20white%20flickr-117376.php)

Patrick Feller/Flickr

**From: Conor Friedersdorf  
To: Michael Brendan Dougherty, Garance Franke-Ruta, Jerome Copulsky  
Subject: Part III**

Say that the longest philosophical speeches were removed from *Atlas Shrugged*. Francisco D'Anconia would muse on money in a brief, plausibly conversational way. Hank Rearden would explain himself succinctly at his trial. And John Galt would never even deliver his monstrosity of a speech.

Does anyone think that the change would cost the novel very many of its satisfied readers? I suspect it would have sold just as well all these years and that it would be stronger for its brevity. "It is right to focus on the speech," Jerome [said](https://web.archive.org/web/20151221094745/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/03/atlas-shrugged-book-club-entry-7-the-impotent-irrationality-of-john-galt/274273/) in his final entry, "for, as I have previously mentioned, the novel is merely the vehicle for the message." Perhaps Ayn Rand would agree, but I don't care. I refuse to let John Galt's speech guide what I glean from the book as fully as I would object if Ernest Hemingway had inserted a didactic 30-page speech by Jake Barnes into *The Sun Also Rises*. I gleaned truths from that story that I'm sure Papa Hemingway would reject, and I suspect the same can be said for the vast majority of people who like *Atlas Shrugged* enough to recommend it to a friend: They have many disagreements with Rand, and almost all regard her as a better novelist than a philosopher, a hypothesis that can be supported by comparing the sales of *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead* to her nonfiction fare.

One wonderful thing about novels: They can be smarter than their novelist.

Care for an example?

Ayn Rand the philosopher posits, via a character, that there need never be disagreement among men of reason -- that they can just let reality decide -- whereas the novelist in her is too skilled to manifest that nonsense in the plot. So we see Ragnar Danneskjold and Hugh Akston in disagreement about the propriety of piracy ... or to cite a more central plot point, protagonist Dagny Taggart in open disagreement with all of Galt's Gulch about the means they'd chosen to carry out their project, even after their month-long effort to persuade her that she's helping her destroyers.

## The Atlas Shrugged Book Club

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[**Read the entire series on Ayn Rand's controversial classic**](https://web.archive.org/web/20151221094745/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/category/atlas-shrugged-book-club)

My conversation mates don't seem to like John Galt much, and I must confess that I don't either. Permitted to invite any of the novel's heroes to a dinner party, he'd be dead last on my list. The "love at first sight" way that Dagny falls for him seems bizarre given Rand's insistence that honorable physical attraction is based on an intellectual judgment about a person's worth. Her previous loves, Francisco and Hank, were both men she knew very well, and it's just never seemed persuasive to me that she would so automatically choose boring old Galt because of his motor, as if "best invention" is somehow a trump among uber-talented titans of different fields.

But the love triangle created by John and Dagny's mutual attraction does give us one of the novel's most deft moments: If you're trying to show why self-sacrifice is self-defeating, what better illustration than showing that John giving up Dagny for Francisco's sake would destroy all three? Of course, that presumes that the conventions of monogamy persist in Galt's Gulch, which they do. I wonder why. Would it somehow be inconsistent with Rand's belief system if Dagny were to spend some nights with Francisco and others with John? Why? I suppose that occurs to me because Rand breaks with convention so much it gets me interested when she keeps to it. Plus, recall Francisco's speech. "You'll always grant me the same response, even if there is a greater one that you grant to another man. No matter what you feel for him, it will not change what you feel for me, and it won't be treason to either, because it comes from the same root, it's the same answer to the same values. No matter what happens in the future, we'll always be what we were to each other, you and I, because you'll always love me." See what I mean?

Michael, I've agreed with a lot of your critiques these last few weeks, but I'm very much in disagreement with your endorsement of the notion that "From almost any page of *Atlas Shrugged*, a voice can be heard, from painful necessity, commanding: 'To a gas chamber -- go!'"

This is a novel about revolutionaries who regard the society they're fighting as irremediably evil ... and still their chosen weapons are (a) a labor strike and (b) lengthy philosophical speeches meant to persuade one another by the force of reason. As I alluded to above, the one man of arms among the group, Ragnar, says the others all disapprove of his methods, and even he explicitly says that when he steals the cargo of ships, he always lets the crew escape before he sinks them. Finally, nothing in Rand's philosophy is more sacrosanct than not being the party to initiate force, and while it might permit various moral choices that we'd regard as monstrous, forcibly rounding people up and sending them to their deaths is obviously not among them.

Stray thoughts:

* The ahistorical rendering of the American founding is annoying throughout this book, but there is one similarity its heroes have with the Founders: They're rich revolutionaries who rebel against the existing order despite the fact that they've done rather well for themselves within it.
* "No private businessman or greedy industrialist would have financed Project X," Dr. Ferris said of the machine that destroys things by projecting sound waves. "He couldn't have afforded it. It's an enormous investment, with no prospect of material gain." It's interesting, isn't it, that (as far as I can recall) there never has been a private businessman that built and wielded a machine intended for wanton destruction -- even though, when you think about it, an evil businessman doing so is a trope of so many comic books and action movies. (Real businessmen don't go Batman on us either.) From where does that trope come?
* Michael, if I had to pick the part of the book that I'd most like to see you grapple with it would be the scene with Jim Taggart and his wife Cheryl, where they're discussing love, and whether it ought to be earned or unearned.
* Here's a line that annoyed me: "Cheryl, what you've been struggling with is the greatest problem in history, the one that has caused all of human suffering." You'd think, reading Rand, that human suffering has never been caused by two selfish men fighting over the best drumstick. That Communist revolutions and religious wars caused great evil doesn't mean they caused *all* evil.
* Dagny avers that the secret to her success is placing nothing above the verdict of her own mind. Yet she proceeds by intuition at various points: as when, for example, she retains a belief in Francisco's core goodness even when her reason tells her that he is a depraved playboy. Once again, novelist Rand, who is aware of loyalty and nostalgia, renders a more realistic portrait than philosopher Rand.
* I rather liked this passage, when Cheryl walks in on her husband having sex with Mrs. Rearden: "Then she found herself in her own room, fumbling frantically to lock her door. She had been flung here by the blind panic of escape, as if it were she who had to hide, she who had to run from the ugliness of being seen in the act of seeing them -- a panic made of revulsion, of pity, of embarrassment, of that mental chastity which recoils from confronting a man with unanswerable proof of his evil." Isn't that a good description of that feeling?

I'd close with two requests. One is directed at everyone who hears *Atlas Shrugged* being invoked in American political discourse: It's been my experience that high-profile politicians and pundits almost always mangle the book, whatever you think of it, and that folks held up as an embodiment of Rand's philosophy would [almost always be villains](https://web.archive.org/web/20151221094745/http:/www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/08/if-paul-ryan-were-an-atlas-shrugged-character-hed-be-a-villain/261036/) if actually in one of her novels. They certainly aren't the champions that most fans of the novel would choose to represent them.

The other request is aimed at the subset of *Atlas Shrugged* fans who invoke it while supporting Republican candidates. I'd just point out that for the GOP to be worthy of that support, it would have to move beyond reflecting the anti-government parts of Rand's philosophy and take up the anti-cronyism imperatives too. Several of the book's great villains, like James Taggart and Orren Boyle, are the CEOs of major corporations who've lobbied their way to unfair advantages and outsized profits. The conservative movement has a long list of punching bags, from activists like Al Sharpton to journalists like Dan Rather to bureaucrats like Janet Reno to celebrities like Sean Penn. Can anyone think of a CEO who has been called out by the conservative movement as a personification of what's wrong with America? If one of the most egregious real-life cronies were attacked and it resulted in real reform, the credibility boost would be huge and deserved.

**From: Garance Franke-Ruta  
To: Michael Brendan Dougherty, Conor Friedersdorf, Jerome Copulsky  
Subject: Part III**

Conor suggests most people who like Atlas Shrugged enough to recommend it to a friend would "have many disagreements with Rand," and "regard her as a better novelist than a philosopher, a hypothesis that can be supported by comparing the sales of Atlas Shrugged and The Fountainhead to her nonfiction fare."

If so, I couldn't disagree with them more. As philosophy, I found her work interesting, though not convincing, but as literature I have found Atlas Shrugged a terribly written and constructed book. And we all know contemporaneous book sales are not correlated with enduring literary value. That said, I am glad to have engaged with the book, which is a touchstone in parts of the contemporary political world, though only in the same way I felt a satisfaction at having watched Field of Dreams -- because of the endless references to it in the political arena, rather than because of any qualities of enjoyment in the enterprise of absorbing it.

As to Rand's main political argument, I would suggest that America already had a major Atlas Shrugged moment. It was called the '60s and '70s. I know people who were raised in or helped create the Galt's Gulches of those days -- there was a back-to-the-land movement among educated Americans, let us recall. And you know what? Rand was just wrong. America continued as it had, largely untroubled by the absence of these exemplars of excellence. If the nation had problems in the '70s, and it did, it had more to do with the lingering impact of the oil shocks on the economy and the "turn on" part of the "turn on, tune in, drop out" culture.

Society is not a bunch of schmoes with a handful of excellent people who keep it together, something that will fall apart without them. It's a system in which every clearing out of one group allows new people to rise to excellence, or at least prominence. But we all create each other, and can recreate each other and ourselves in response to the demands of the times.

Maybe in an oppressive, quasi-fascist state like the one described in Atlas Shrugged it is possible to stop the motor of the world. But in America, and in the real world, new people step up to the demands before them. Excellence and competence are not inherent genetic qualities, but the product of training, experience, intellect, values, and opportunity. In a free society, when elites go Galt, no one misses them for long, because new people rise up to take their place. The motor of the world preceded us, and it continues to turn after we step out of society, or even out of existence.

Galt's novel is a dystopian vision from start to finish. I give her credit for sensing something oppressive afoot in the tenor of the America of her times, and for, in a way, predicting the "Me Generation" with its communes and retreats and hippie back-to-the-land movement as a response to it. But we are past that now, and those who turn to her mid-century novel to direct their political thinking today are, sadly, turning to a dated vision of an America that never was to order their thoughts about what could be in a land that is freer and more welcoming of talent than Rand recognized.