

Ayn Rand's Contribution to Philosophy

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"[It was] a face that bore no mark of pain or fear or guilt. The shape of his mouth was pride, and more: it was as if he took pride in being proud. The angular planes of his face made her think of arrogance, of tension, of scorn—yet the face had none of these qualities, it had their final sum: a look of serene determination and of certainty. . . . It was a face that had nothing to hide or to escape, a face with no fear of being seen or of seeing, so that the first thing she grasped about him was the intense perceptiveness of his eyes—he looked as if his faculty of sight were his best-loved tool and its exercise were a limitless, joyous adventure, as if his eyes imparted a superlative value to himself and to the world—to himself for his ability to see, to the world for being a place so eagerly worth seeing" (Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, 647).

Ayn Rand's greatest contribution to philosophy, in my view, lies not in her philosophical writings, but in her novels. The vision of life she presents in her novels has shown thousands of readers the importance of philosophical reflection in their lives. Rand is well-known as the great individualist, the champion of individual liberty, free markets, and minimal government. She is also well-known as an ethical egoist. What is rarely understood, even among her devotees, is how close her brand of ethical egoism is to ancient eudaimonism.

Rand's novels dramatize, as no other fiction or film has, the ancient philosophical claim that the fully happy life must be the ethical life, the life of virtue, that morality is in one's self-interest—and that true self-interest or happiness cannot be defined entirely independently of morality.

In doing so the novels contradict—rightly, to my mind—some of her own explicitly philosophical claims about these issues. The joy in being alive in this world, the serenity and certainty, the freedom from pain, fear, and guilt that John Galt is described as possessing in the passage quoted above, has an essential connection to his perceptiveness, his focus on reality, and openness. And these traits are either themselves virtues or aspects of virtue. Remarkably, Rand's novels combine striking, complex plots with the most subtle psychological explorations of her characters' emotions and thoughts and philosophical reflections that rarely lose sight of the dramatic context.

Readers of Aristotle will recognize the connections between the passage quoted above and Aristotle's conception of pride as the crown of the virtues, a virtue that only the most virtuous can have; his conception of the virtuous as especially perceptive; and his remark in the *Metaphysics* that the faculty of sight is our best loved faculty. Remarkably, again, the drama of good and evil Rand's characters play out is set in the contemporary industrial America of skyscrapers, steel mills, transcontinental railroads, and glimmering highways. Her protagonists are not explorers of new planets or dragon-slayers or commanders of armies against invading forces, but women who run railroads and men who pioneer new architectural concepts. The power of Rand's analyses of her characters' motivations, the contemporaneous settings, and the gripping plots, explain why so many have found her depiction of the nature of virtue and its relationship to happiness so compelling and inspiring. Rand's vision of life at its best is a vision of liberation, joy, and success.

Many of the qualities ascribed to Galt in the passage above are shared by her other heroes and heroines at their best: exceptional self-possession, independence of thought, the innocence and purity of a consciousness that seeks always to see things as they are, freedom from the fears and conflicts inherent in self-deception and manipulation, and freedom from the burdens of unwarranted guilt and unnecessary suffering. In *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* her protagonists are also largely successful in achieving their external aims, i.e., their professional and romantic goals. In Rand's novels we get a picture of happiness as a successful state of life, successful both internally or psychologically and externally or "existentially."

This is contrary to many of Rand's statements in her philosophical essays, where she equates happiness with success in attaining one's (rational) external goals or values and the positive mental states that result therefrom. But, as stories of tortured geniuses testify, positive mental states are only contingently related to external success, no matter how rational

one's goals: one can be successful and, at the same time, inflicted with fear and self-doubt. The reality-anchored serenity and sense of fulfillment that is so central to her depiction of her characters' happiness is guaranteed not by the achievement of external values, but by the achievement of certain inner or spiritual values. Rand's picture of happiness in her novels is thus far more plausible than her overtly philosophical view. It is also more plausibly connected to virtue.

Rand's official view is that virtue is a means to happiness. This is an instance of the more general claim that virtues are means to rational values, and values are the ends that we act to gain or keep through virtuous activity (*The Virtue of Selfishness*). But if this is true, then we ought, rationally, to act virtuously only when it is likely to bring us the values we aim at, and not otherwise.

Thus, in *The Fountainhead* Howard Roark should have acted with integrity only when doing so was likely to help him to build the sorts of buildings he thought should be built—and not when it was likely to destroy his chances of ever building again. Yet this suggests a contingency of connection between virtue and happiness that Rand clearly does not accept. She clearly believes both that Roark did the right thing in refusing to compromise, even though it condemned him to a quarry—and that virtuous action has a necessary connection to happiness.

Hence, although Rand never says so explicitly, she must see happiness not primarily in terms of external success, but at least equally in terms of an inner success, success in achieving the values that define the virtues. And, indeed, not only is this conception of happiness illustrated in her novels, it follows from her view of the cardinal values and their connection to happiness. According to Rand, "happiness is possible only to [someone who] . . . seeks nothing but rational values and finds his joy in nothing but rational actions" (VOS, 29). The three cardinal values that the virtues realize and preserve, and that are "the means to and the realization of one's ultimate value, one's own life" (25), are reason, purpose, and self-esteem.

Since Rand typically equates the ultimate value that is "one's own life" with a happy life, it follows that someone who has sound reason, a sense of purpose, and self-esteem, "realizes" or possesses a major part of happiness, regardless of external failure. And since a virtuous life, specifically, a life of rationality, productivity, and moral ambitiousness, necessarily expresses these values, virtuous activity is sufficient for possessing a major part of happiness. It is this conceptual connection between virtue and the cardinal values, and between the cardinal values and

happiness, that establishes a necessary connection between virtue and happiness.

Rand's neo-Aristotelian conception of the relationship between virtue and happiness thus emphasizes both a certain kind of active, goal-directed life, and a certain kind of character, a character of which a clear awareness of self and others is an important feature. Even more explicitly than in Aristotle, a recognition of certain facts is central to each of the virtues. But there are also distinctively existentialist emphases in her conception of virtue and vice.

Like Nietzsche and Sartre, Rand sees self-deception or, more generally, evasion of reality, a motivated unfocusing of consciousness, as the heart of vice. Her worst characters also exemplify the sort of masked, malicious resentment of superior character and ability that Nietzsche called *ressentiment*. Nietzschean in many of its overtones, too, is her attack on the morality of self-sacrificial altruism as an expression of such *ressentiment*, and a trap for the innocent of spirit.

Rand's lasting achievement is to have written novels that convince us, as no argument can, of the ugliness and self-destructiveness of vice and, by contrast, of the centrality of virtue to full happiness, a happiness that includes a reality-anchored "capacity for unclouded enjoyment" and "an inviolate peace of spirit" (AS, 117).