

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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**Ayn Rand** [nee, Alisa Zinov'yevna Rosenbaum]  
(1905 – 1982)

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## INTERVIEW WITH AYN RAND

**Alvin Toffler**

(Part 1 of 2)

**TOFFLER:** Miss Rand, your novels and essays, especially your controversial best seller, *Atlas Shrugged*, present a carefully engineered, internally consistent world view. They are, in effect, the expression of an all-encompassing philosophical system. What do you seek to accomplish with this new philosophy?

**RAND:** I seek to provide men—or those who care to think—with an integrated, consistent and rational view of life.

**TOFFLER:** What are the basic premises of Objectivism? Where does it begin?

**RAND:** It begins with the axiom that existence exists, which means that an objective reality exists independent of any perceiver or of the perceiver's emotions, feelings, wishes, hopes or fears. Objectivism holds that reason is man's only means of perceiving reality and his only guide to action. By reason, I mean the faculty which identifies and integrates the material provided by man's senses.

**TOFFLER:** In *Atlas Shrugged*, your hero, John Galt, declares, "I swear—by my life and my love of it—that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine." How is this related to your basic principles?

**RAND:** Galt's statement is a dramatized summation of the Objectivist ethics. Any system of ethics is based on and derived, implicitly or explicitly, from a metaphysics. The ethic derived from the metaphysical base of Objectivism holds that, since reason is man's basic tool of survival, rationality is his highest virtue. To use his mind, to perceive reality and to act accordingly, is man's moral imperative. The standard of value of the Objectivist ethics is: man's life—man's survival qua man—or that which the nature of a rational being requires for his proper survival. The Objectivist ethics, in essence, hold that man exists for his own sake, that the pursuit of his own happiness is his highest moral purpose, that he must not sacrifice himself to others, nor sacrifice others to himself. It is this last that Galt's statement summarizes.

**TOFFLER:** What kind of morality derives from this, in terms of the individual's behavior?

**RAND:** This is presented in detail in *Atlas Shrugged*.

**TOFFLER:** The heroine of *Atlas Shrugged* was, in your words, "completely incapable of experiencing a feeling of fundamental guilt." Is any system of morality possible without guilt?

**RAND:** The important word in the statement you quoted is "fundamental." Fundamental guilt does not mean the ability to judge one's own actions and regret a wrong action, if one commits it. Fundamental guilt means that man is evil and guilty by nature.

**TOFFLER:** You mean original sin?

**RAND:** Exactly. It is the concept of original sin that my heroine, or I, or any Objectivist, is incapable of accepting or of ever experiencing emotionally. It is the concept of original sin that negates morality. If man is guilty by nature, he has no choice about it. If he has no choice, the issue does not belong in the field of morality. Morality pertains only to the sphere of man's free will—only to those actions which are open to his choice. To consider man guilty by nature is a contradiction in terms. My heroine would be capable of experiencing guilt about a specific action. Only, being a woman of high moral stature and self-esteem, she would see to it that she never earned any guilt by her actions. She would act in a totally moral manner and, therefore, would not accept an unearned guilt.

**TOFFLER:** In *Atlas Shrugged*, one of your leading characters is asked, "What's the most depraved type of human being?" His reply is surprising: He doesn't say a sadist or a murderer or a sex maniac or a dictator; he says, "The man without a purpose." Yet most people seem to go through their lives without a clearly defined purpose. Do you regard them as depraved?

**RAND:** Yes, to a certain extent.

**TOFFLER:** Why?

**RAND:** Because that aspect of their character lies at the root of and causes all the evils which you mentioned in your question. Sadism, dictatorship, any form of evil, is the consequence of a man's evasion of reality. A consequence of his failure to think. The man without a purpose is a man who drifts at the mercy of random feelings or unidentified urges and is capable of any evil, because he is totally out of control of his own life. In order to be in control of your life, you have to have a purpose—a productive purpose.

**TOFFLER:** Weren't Hitler and Stalin, to name two tyrants, in control of their own lives, and didn't they have a clear purpose?

**RAND:** Certainly not. Observe that both of them ended as literal psychotics. They were men who lacked self-esteem and, therefore, hated all of existence. Their psychology, in effect, is summarized in *Atlas Shrugged* by the character of James Taggart. The man who has no purpose, but has to act, acts to destroy others. That is not the same thing as a productive or creative purpose.

**TOFFLER:** If a person organizes his life around a single, neatly defined purpose, isn't he in danger of becoming extremely narrow in his horizons?

**RAND:** Quite the contrary. A central purpose serves to integrate all the other concerns of a man's life. It establishes the hierarchy, the relative importance, of his values, it saves him from pointless inner conflicts, it permits him to enjoy life on a wide scale and to carry that enjoyment into any area open to his mind; whereas a man without a purpose is lost in chaos. He does not know what his values are. He does not know how to judge. He cannot tell what is or is not important to him, and, therefore, he drifts helplessly at the mercy of any chance stimulus or any whim of the moment. He can enjoy nothing. He spends his life searching for some value which he will never find.

**TOFFLER:** Couldn't the attempt to rule whim out of life, to act in a totally rational fashion, be viewed as conducive to a juiceless, joyless kind of existence?

**RAND:** I truly must say that I don't know what you are talking about. Let's define our terms. Reason is man's tool of knowledge, the faculty that enables him to perceive the facts of reality. To act rationally means to act in accordance with the facts of reality. Emotions are not tools of cognition. What you feel tells you nothing about the facts; it merely tells you something about your estimate of the facts. Emotions are the result of your value judgments; they are caused by your basic premises, which you may hold consciously or subconsciously, which may be right or wrong. A whim is an emotion whose cause you neither know nor care to discover. Now what does it mean, to act on whim? It means that a man acts like a zombie, without any knowledge of what he deals with, what he wants to accomplish, or what motivates him. It means that a man acts in a state of temporary insanity. Is this what you call juicy or colorful? I think the only juice that can come out of such a situation is blood. To act against the facts of reality can result only in destruction.

**TOFFLER:** Should one ignore emotions altogether, rule them out of one's life entirely?

**RAND:** Of course not. One should merely keep them in their place. An emotion is an automatic response, an automatic effect of man's value premises. An effect, not a cause. There is no necessary clash, no dichotomy between man's reason and his emotions—provided he observes their proper relationship. A rational man knows—or makes it a point to discover—the source of his emotions, the basic premises from which they come; if his premises are wrong, he corrects them. He never acts on emotions for which he cannot ac-

count, the meaning of which he does not understand. In appraising a situation, he knows why he reacts as he does and whether he is right. He has no inner conflicts, his mind and his emotions are integrated, his consciousness is in perfect harmony. His emotions are not his enemies, they are his means of enjoying life. But they are not his guide; the guide is his mind. This relationship cannot be reversed, however. If a man takes his emotions as the cause and his mind as their passive effect, if he is guided by his emotions and uses his mind only to rationalize or justify them somehow—then he is acting immorally, he is condemning himself to misery, failure, defeat, and he will achieve nothing but destruction—his own and that of others.

**TOFFLER:** According to your philosophy, work and achievement are the highest goals of life. Do you regard as immoral those who find greater fulfillment in the warmth of friendship and family ties?

**RAND:** If they place such things as friendship and family ties above their own productive work, yes, then they are immoral. Friendship, family life and human relationships are not primary in a man's life. A man who places others first, above his own creative work, is an emotional parasite; whereas, if he places his work first, there is no conflict between his work and his enjoyment of human relationships.

**TOFFLER:** Do you believe that women as well as men should organize their lives around work—and if so, what kind of work?

**RAND:** Of course. I believe that women are human beings. What is proper for a man is proper for a woman. The basic principles are the same. I would not attempt to prescribe what kind of work a man should do, and I would not attempt it in regard to women. There is no particular work which is specifically feminine. Women can choose their work according to their own purpose and premises in the same manner as men do.

**TOFFLER:** In your opinion, is a woman immoral who chooses to devote herself to home and family instead of a career?

**RAND:** Not immoral—I would say she is impractical, because a home cannot be a full-time occupation, except when her children are young. However, if she wants a family and wants to make that her career, at least for a while, it would be proper—if she approaches it as a career, that is, if she studies the subject, if she defines the rules and principles by which she wants to bring up her children, if she approaches her task in an intellectual manner. It is a

very responsible task and a very important one, but only when treated as a science, not as a mere emotional indulgence.

**TOFFLER:** Where, would you say, should romantic love fit into the life of a rational person whose single driving passion is work?

**RAND:** It is his greatest reward. The only man capable of experiencing a profound romantic love is the man driven by passion for his work—because love is an expression of self-esteem, of the deepest values in a man’s or a woman’s character. One falls in love with the person who shares these values. If a man has no clearly defined values, and no moral character, he is not able to appreciate another person. In this respect, I would like to quote from *The Fountainhead*, in which the hero utters a line that has often been quoted by readers: “To say ‘I love you’ one must know first how to say the ‘I.’”

**TOFFLER:** You hold that one’s own happiness is the highest end, and that self-sacrifice is immoral. Does this apply to love as well as work?

**RAND:** To love more than to anything else. When you are in love, it means that the person you love is of great personal, selfish importance to you and to your life. If you were selfless, it would have to mean that you derive no personal pleasure or happiness from the company and the existence of the person you love, and that you are motivated only by self-sacrificial pity for that person’s need of you. I don’t have to point out to you that no one would be flattered by, nor would accept, a concept of that kind. Love is not self-sacrifice, but the most profound assertion of your own needs and values. It is for your own happiness that you need the person you love, and that is the greatest compliment, the greatest tribute you can pay to that person.

**TOFFLER:** You have denounced the puritan notion that physical love is ugly or evil; yet you have written that “Indiscriminate desire and unselective indulgence are possible only to those who regard sex and themselves as evil.” Would you say that discriminate and selective indulgence in sex is moral?

**RAND:** I would say that a selective and discriminate sex life is not an indulgence. The term indulgence implies that it is an action taken lightly and casually. I say that sex is one of the most important aspects of man’s life and, therefore, must never be approached lightly or casually. A sexual relationship is proper only on the ground of the highest values one can find in a human being. Sex

must not be anything other than a response to values. And that is why I consider promiscuity immoral. Not because sex is evil, but because sex is too good and too important.

**TOFFLER:** Does this mean, in your view, that sex should involve only married partners?

**RAND:** Not necessarily. What sex should involve is a very serious relationship. Whether that relationship should or should not become a marriage is a question which depends on the circumstances and the context of the two persons' lives. I consider marriage a very important institution, but it is important when and if two people have found the person with whom they wish to spend the rest of their lives—a question of which no man or woman can be automatically certain. When one is certain that one's choice is final, then marriage is, of course, a desirable state. But this does not mean that any relationship based on less than total certainty is improper. I think the question of an affair or a marriage depends on the knowledge and the position of the two persons involved and should be left up to them. Either is moral, provided only that both parties take the relationship seriously and that it is based on values.

**TOFFLER:** As one who champions the cause of enlightened self-interest, how do you feel about dedicating one's life to hedonistic self-gratification?

**RAND:** I am profoundly opposed to the philosophy of hedonism. Hedonism is the doctrine which holds that the good is whatever gives you pleasure and, therefore, pleasure is the standard of morality. Objectivism holds that the good must be defined by a rational standard of value, that pleasure is not a first cause, but only a consequence, that only the pleasure which proceeds from a rational value judgment can be regarded as moral, that pleasure, as such, is not a guide to action nor a standard of morality. To say that pleasure should be the standard of morality simply means that whichever values you happen to have chosen, consciously or subconsciously, rationally or irrationally, are right and moral. This means that you are to be guided by chance feelings, emotions and whims, not by your mind. My philosophy is the opposite of hedonism. I hold that one cannot achieve happiness by random, arbitrary or subjective means. One can achieve happiness only on the basis of rational values. By rational values, I do not mean anything that a man may arbitrarily or blindly declare to be rational. It is the province of morality, of the science of ethics, to define for men what is a rational standard and what are the rational values to pursue.

**TOFFLER:** You have said that the kind of man who spends his time running after women is a man who “despises himself.” Would you elaborate?

**RAND:** This type of man is reversing cause and effect in regard to sex. Sex is an expression of a man’s self-esteem, of his own self-value. But the man who does not value himself tries to reverse this process. He tries to derive his self-esteem from his sexual conquests, which cannot be done. He cannot acquire his own value from the number of women who regard him as valuable. Yet that is the hopeless thing which he attempts.

**TOFFLER:** You attack the idea that sex is “impervious to reason.” But isn’t sex a nonrational biological instinct?

**RAND:** No. To begin with, man does not possess any instincts. Physically, sex is merely a capacity. But how a man will exercise this capacity and whom he will find attractive depends on his standard of value. It depends on his premises, which he may hold consciously or subconsciously, and which determine his choices. It is in this manner that his philosophy directs his sex life.

**TOFFLER:** Isn’t the individual equipped with powerful, nonrational biological drives?

**RAND:** He is not. A man is equipped with a certain kind of physical mechanism and certain needs, but without any knowledge of how to fulfill them. For instance, man needs food. He experiences hunger. But, unless he learns first to identify this hunger, then to know that he needs food and how to obtain it, he will starve. The need, the hunger, will not tell him how to satisfy it. Man is born with certain physical and psychological needs, but he can neither discover them nor satisfy them without the use of his mind. Man has to discover what is right or wrong for him as a rational being. His so-called urges will not tell him what to do.

**TOFFLER:** In *Atlas Shrugged* you wrote, “There are two sides to every issue. One side is right and the other is wrong, but the middle is always evil.” Isn’t this a rather black-and-white set of values?

**RAND:** It most certainly is. I most emphatically advocate a black-and-white view of the world. Let us define this. What is meant by the expression “black and white”? It means good and evil. Before you can identify anything as gray, as middle of the road, you have to know what is black and what is white, because gray is merely a



mixture of the two. And when you have established that one alternative is good and the other is evil, there is no justification for the choice of a mixture. There is no justification ever for choosing any part of what you know to be evil.

**TOFFLER:** Then you believe in absolutes?

**RAND:** I do.

**TOFFLER:** Can't Objectivism, then, be called a dogma?

**RAND:** No. A dogma is a set of beliefs accepted on faith; that is, without rational justification or against rational evidence. A dogma is a matter of blind faith. Objectivism is the exact opposite. Objectivism tells you that you must not accept any idea or conviction unless you can demonstrate its truth by means of reason.

**TOFFLER:** If widely accepted, couldn't Objectivism harden into a dogma?

**RAND:** No. I have found that Objectivism is its own protection against people who might attempt to use it as a dogma. Since Objectivism requires the use of one's mind, those who attempt to take broad principles and apply them unthinkingly and indiscriminately to the concretes of their own existence find that it cannot be done. They are then compelled either to reject Objectivism or to apply it. When I say apply, I mean that they have to use their own mind, their own thinking, in order to know how to apply Objectivist principles to the specific problems of their own lives.

**TOFFLER:** You have said you are opposed to faith. Do you believe in God?

**RAND:** Certainly not.

**TOFFLER:** You've been quoted as saying "The cross is the symbol of torture, of the sacrifice of the ideal to the non-ideal. I prefer the dollar sign." Do you truly feel that two thousand years of Christianity can be summed up with the word "torture"?

**RAND:** To begin with, I never said that. It's not my style. Neither literally nor intellectually. I don't say I prefer the dollar sign—that is cheap nonsense, and please leave this in your copy. I don't know the origin of that particular quote, but the meaning of the dollar sign is made clear in *Atlas Shrugged*. It is the symbol, clearly explained in the story, of free trade and, therefore, of a free mind. A

free mind and a free economy are corollaries. One can't exist without the other. The dollar sign, as the symbol of the currency of a free country, is the symbol of the free mind. More than that, as to the historical origin of the dollar sign, although it has never been proved, one very likely hypothesis is that it stands for the initials of the United States. So much for the dollar sign.

Now you want me to speak about the cross. What is correct is that I do regard the cross as the symbol of the sacrifice of the ideal to the non-ideal. Isn't that what it does mean? Christ, in terms of the Christian philosophy, is the human ideal. He personifies that which men should strive to emulate. Yet, according to the Christian mythology, he died on the cross not for his own sins but for the sins of the non-ideal people. In other words, a man of perfect virtue was sacrificed for men who are vicious and who are expected or supposed to accept that sacrifice. If I were a Christian, nothing could make me more indignant than that: the notion of sacrificing the ideal to the non-ideal, or virtue to vice. And it is in the name of that symbol that men are asked to sacrifice themselves for their inferiors. That is precisely how the symbolism is used. That is torture.

**TOFFLER:** Has no religion, in your estimation, ever offered anything of constructive value to human life?

**RAND:** Qua religion, no—in the sense of blind belief, belief unsupported by, or contrary to, the facts of reality and the conclusions of reason. Faith, as such, is extremely detrimental to human life: it is the negation of reason. But you must remember that religion is an early form of philosophy, that the first attempts to explain the universe, to give a coherent frame of reference to man's life and a code of moral values, were made by religion, before men graduated or developed enough to have philosophy. And, as philosophies, some religions have very valuable moral points. They may have a good influence or proper principles to inculcate, but in a very contradictory context and, on a very—how should I say it?—dangerous or malevolent base: on the ground of faith.

**TOFFLER:** Then you would say that if you had to choose between the symbol of the cross and the symbol of the dollar, you would choose the dollar?

**RAND:** I wouldn't accept such a choice. Put it another way: If I had to choose between faith and reason, I wouldn't consider the choice even conceivable. As a human being, one chooses reason.

**TOFFLER:** Do you consider wealthy businessmen like the Fords and the Rockefellers immoral because they use their wealth to support charity?

**RAND:** No. That is their privilege, if they want to. My views on charity are very simple. I do not consider it a major virtue and, above all, I do not consider it a moral duty. There is nothing wrong in helping other people, if and when they are worthy of the help and you can afford to help them. I regard charity as a marginal issue. What I am fighting is the idea that charity is a moral duty and a primary virtue.

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## WELCOME NEW MEMBER

**Steven Rossiter**

*We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.*

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