The Philosophy of Objectivism: A Brief Summary

By Dr. Leonard Peikoff
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A full system of philosophy advocating reason and egoism has been defined in our time by Ayn Rand. It is the philosophy of Objectivism, presented in detail in *Atlas Shrugged*, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, and *The Virtue of Selfishness*. It is the antidote to the present state of the world. (All further quotations, unless otherwise identified, are from the works of Ayn Rand.)

Most philosophers have left their starting points to unnamed implication. The base of Objectivism is explicit: "Existence exists—and the act of grasping that statement implies two corollary axioms: that something exists which one perceives and that one exists possessing consciousness, consciousness being the faculty of perceiving that which exists."

Existence and consciousness are facts implicit in every perception. They are the base of all knowledge (and the precondition of proof): knowledge presupposes something to know and someone to know it. They are absolutes which cannot be questioned or escaped: every human utterance, including the denial of these axioms, implies their use and acceptance.

The third axiom at the base of knowledge—an axiom true, in Aristotle's words, of "being qua being"—is the Law of Identity. This law defines the essence of existence: to be is to be something, a thing is what it is; and leads to the fundamental principle of all action, the law of causality. The law of causality states that a thing's actions are determined not by chance, but by its nature, i.e., by what it is.

It is important to observe the interrelation of these three axioms. Existence is the first axiom. *The universe exists independent of consciousness*. Man is able to adapt his background to his own requirements, but "Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed" (Francis Bacon). There is no mental process that can change the laws of nature or erase facts. The function of consciousness is not to create reality, but to apprehend it. "Existence is Identity, Consciousness is Identification."

The philosophic source of this viewpoint and its major advocate in the history of philosophy is Aristotle. Its opponents are all the other major traditions, including Platonism, Christianity, and German idealism. Directly or indirectly, these traditions uphold the notion that consciousness is the creator of reality. The essence of this notion is the denial of the axiom that existence exists.

In the religious version, the deniers advocate a consciousness "above" nature, i.e., superior, and contradictory, to existence; in the social version, they melt nature into an indeterminate blur given transient semi-shape by human desire. The first school denies reality by upholding two of them. The second school dispenses with the concept of reality as such. The first rejects science, law, causality, identity, claiming that anything is possible to the omnipotent, miracle-working will of the Lord. The second states the religionists' rejection in secular terms, claiming that anything is possible to the will of "the people."

Neither school can claim a basis in objective evidence. There is no way to reason from nature to its negation, or from facts to their subversion, or from any premise to the

obliteration of argument as such, i.e., of its foundation: the axioms of existence and identity.

Metaphysics and epistemology are closely interrelated; together they form a philosophy's foundation. In the history of philosophy, the rejection of reality and the rejection of reason have been corollaries. Similarly, as Aristotle's example indicates, a pro-reality metaphysics implies and requires a pro-reason epistemology.

Reason is defined by Ayn Rand as "the faculty that identifies and integrates the material provided by man's senses."

Reason performs this function by means of concepts, and the validity of reason rests on the validity of concepts. But the nature and origin of concepts is a major philosophic problem. If concepts refer to facts, then knowledge has a base in reality, and one can define objective principles to guide man's process of cognition. If concepts are cut off from reality, then so is all human knowledge, and man is helplessly blind.

This is the "problem of universals," on which Western philosophy has foundered.

Plato claimed to find the referent of concepts not in this world, but in a supernatural dimension of essences. The Kantians regard concepts (some or all) as devoid of referents, i.e., as subjective creations of the human mind independent of external facts. Both approaches and all of their variants in the history of philosophy lead to the same essential consequence: the severing of man's tools of cognition from reality, and therefore the undercutting of man's mind. (Although Aristotle's epistemology is far superior, his theory of concepts is intermingled with remnants of Platonism and is untenable.) Recent philosophers have given up the problem and, as a result, have given up philosophy as such.

Ayn Rand challenges and sweeps aside the main bulwark of the anti-mind axis. Her historic feat is to tie man's distinctive form of cognition to reality, i.e., to validate man's reason.

According to Objectivism, concepts *are* derived from and *do* refer to the facts of reality.

The mind at birth (as Aristotle first stated) is *tabula rasa*; there are no innate ideas. The senses are man's primary means of contact with reality; they give him the precondition of all subsequent knowledge, the evidence that something is. What the something is he discovers on the conceptual level of awareness.

Conceptualization is man's method of organizing sensory material. To form a concept, one isolates two or more similar concretes from the rest of one's perceptual field, and integrates them into a single mental unit, symbolized by a word. A concept subsumes an unlimited number of instances: the concretes one isolated, and all others (past, present, and future) which are similar to them.

Similarity is the key to this process. The mind can retain the characteristics of similar concretes *without specifying their measurements*, which vary from case to case. "A concept is a mental integration of two or more units possessing the same distinguishing characteristic(s), with their particular measurements omitted."

The basic principle of concept-formation (which states that the omitted measurements must exist in *some* quantity, but may exist in *any* quantity) is the equivalent of the basic principle of algebra, which states that algebraic symbols must be given *some* numerical

value, but may be given *any* value. In this sense and respect, perceptual awareness is the arithmetic, but *conceptual awareness is the algebra of cognition*.

Concepts are neither supernatural nor subjective: they refer to facts of this world, as processed by man's means of cognition. (The foregoing is a brief indication; for a full discussion see *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*.)

The senses, concepts, logic: these are the elements of man's rational faculty—its start, its form, its method. In essence, "follow reason" means: base knowledge on observation; form concepts according to the actual (measurable) relationships among concretes; use concepts according to the rules of logic (ultimately, the Law of Identity). Since each of these elements is based on the facts of reality, the conclusions reached by a process of reason are *objective*.

The alternative to reason is some form of mysticism or skepticism.

The mystic seeks supernatural knowledge; the skeptic denies the possibility of any knowledge. The mystic claims that man's means of cognition are inadequate and that true knowledge requires illumination from God; the skeptic agrees, then throws out God. The mystic upholds absolutes, which he defends by an appeal to faith; the skeptic answers that he has no faith. The mystic's faith, ultimately, is in his feelings, which he regards as a pipeline to the beyond; the skeptic drops the beyond, then follows *his* feelings, which, he says, are the only basis of action in an unknowable world.

Feelings are products of men's ideas and value-judgments, held consciously or subconsciously. Feelings are not tools of cognition or a guide to action.

The old-fashioned religionists condemned human reason on the grounds that it is limited, finite, earthbound, as against the perfect but ineffable mind of God. This implies an attack on identity (as does any rejection of the finite); but it does so under cover of affirming a consciousness with an allegedly greater, supernatural identity. The modern nihilists are more explicit: they campaign, not for the infinite, but for a zero. Just as in metaphysics they reject the concept of reality, so in epistemology they reject the possibility of consciousness.

Man, say the Kantians, cannot know "things as they are," because his knowledge is acquired by human senses, human concepts, human logic, i.e., by the human means of knowledge.

The same type of argument would apply to any consciousness—human, animal, or divine (assuming the latter existed): if it is something, if it is limited to some, *any*, means of knowledge, then by the same reasoning it would not know "things as they are," but only "things as they appear" to that kind of consciousness.

Kant objects to the fact that man's mind has a nature. His theory is: identity—the essence of existence—invalidates consciousness. Or: a means of knowledge makes knowledge impossible. As Ayn Rand points out, this theory implies that "man is blind, because he has eyes—deaf, because he has ears—deluded, because he has a mind—and the things he perceives do not exist, *because* he perceives them."

Just as Kant's epistemological nihilism sweeps cognition away from identity, so his ethical nihilism sweeps morality—the field of *values*—away from any enjoyment of life.

The Objectivist ethics is the opposite of Kant's.

The Objectivist ethics begins with a fundamental question: why is ethics necessary?

The answer lies in man's nature as a living organism. A living organism has to act in the face of a constant alternative: life or death. Life is conditional; it can be sustained only by a specific course of action performed by the living organism, such as the actions of obtaining food. In this regard plants and animals have no choice: within the limits of their powers, they take automatically the actions their life requires. Man does have a choice. He does not know automatically what actions will sustain him; if he is to survive he must discover, then practice by choice, a code of values and virtues, the specific code which human life requires. The purpose of ethics is to define such a code.

Objectivism is the first philosophy to identify the relationship between life and moral values. "Ethics," writes Ayn Rand, "is an *objective, metaphysical necessity of man's survival*—not by the grace of the supernatural nor of your neighbors nor of your whims, but by the grace of reality and the nature of life."

The standard of ethics, required by the nature of reality and the nature of man, is Man's Life. "All that which is proper to the life of a rational being is the good; all that which destroys it is the evil."

"Man's mind," states John Galt, the protagonist of *Atlas Shrugged*,

is his basic tool of survival. Life is given to him, survival is not. His body is given to him, its sustenance is not. His mind is given to him, its content is not. To remain alive, he must act, and before he can act he must know the nature and purpose of his action. He cannot obtain his food without a knowledge of food and of the way to obtain it. He cannot dig a ditch—or build a cyclotron—without a knowledge of his aim and of the means to achieve it. To remain alive, he must think.

Thinking is not an automatic process. A man can choose to think or to let his mind stagnate, or he can choose actively to turn against his intelligence, to evade his knowledge, to subvert his reason. If he refuses to think, he courts disaster: he cannot with impunity reject his means of perceiving reality.

Thinking is a delicate, difficult process, which man cannot perform unless knowledge is his goal, logic is his method, and the judgment of his mind is his guiding absolute. Thought requires *selfishness*, the fundamental selfishness of a rational faculty that places nothing above the integrity of its own function.

A man cannot think if he places something—anything—above his perception of reality. He cannot follow the evidence unswervingly or uphold his conclusions intransigently, while regarding compliance with other men as his moral imperative, self-abasement as his highest virtue, and sacrifice as his primary duty. He cannot use his brain while surrendering his sovereignty over it, i.e., while accepting his neighbors as its owner and term-setter.

Men learn from others, they build on the work of their predecessors, they achieve by cooperation feats that would be impossible on a desert island. But all such social relationships require the exercise of the human faculty of cognition; they depend on the solitary individual, "solitary" in the primary, inner sense of the term, the sense of a man facing reality firsthand, seeking not to crucify himself on the cross of others or to accept their word as an act of faith, but to understand, to connect, to know.

Man's mind requires selfishness, and so does his life in every aspect: a living organism has to be the beneficiary of its own actions. It has to pursue specific objects—for itself, for its own sake and survival. Life requires the gaining of values, not their loss;

achievement, not renunciation; self-preservation, not self-sacrifice. Man *can* choose to value and pursue self-immolation, but he cannot survive or prosper by such a method.

Moral selfishness does not mean a license to do whatever one pleases, guided by whims. It means the exacting discipline of defining and pursuing one's *rational* self-interest. A code of rational self-interest rejects every form of human sacrifice, whether of oneself to others or of others to oneself. The ethics of rational self-interest upholds the exercise of one's mind in the service of one's life, and all of the specific value-choices and character attributes which such exercise entails. It upholds the virtues of rationality, independence, integrity, honesty, justice, productiveness, pride. It does not advocate "survival at any price."

Man's life, as required by his nature, is not the life of a mindless brute, of a looting thug or a mooching mystic, but the life of a thinking being—not life by means of force or fraud, but life by means of achievement—not survival at any price, since there's only one price that pays for man's survival: reason.

Reason is an attribute of the individual. Thought is a process performed not by men, but by man—in the singular. No society, committee, or "organic" group can do it. What a group can do in this regard is only: to leave the individual free to function, or to stop him.

The basic *political* requirement of Man's Life is freedom.

"Freedom" in this context means the power to act without coercion by others. It means an individual's power to act according to his own judgment, while respecting the same right in others. In a free society, men renounce a lethal method of dealing with disagreements: the initiation of physical force.

Force is the antonym and negation of thought. Understanding is not produced by a punch in the face; intellectual clarity does not flow from the muzzle of a gun; the weighing of evidence is not mediated by spasms of terror. The mind is a cognitive faculty; it cannot achieve knowledge or conviction apart from or against its perception of reality; it cannot be forced.

The proper political system, in essence—the system which guards the freedom of man's mind—is the original American system, based on the concept of inalienable individual rights. "[T]he source of man's rights is not divine law or congressional law, but the law of identity. A is A—and Man is Man. *Rights* are conditions of existence required by man's nature for his proper survival."

The Founding Fathers were right about the fact that rights are political, not economic, i.e., that they are sanctions to act and to keep the products of one's action, not unearned claims to the actions or products of others. And they were right about the fact that the proper function of government is the protection of man's rights.

Man's rights, Ayn Rand observes, can be violated only by physical force (fraud is an indirect form of force). A political system based on the recognition of rights is one that guards man against violence. Men therefore deal with one another not as potential killers, but as sovereign traders, according to their own independent judgment and voluntary consent. This kind of system represents the methodical protection of man's mind and of his self-interest, i.e., of the function and purpose on which human life depends.

Government is the agency that holds a monopoly on the legal use of physical force. In a free society the government uses force only in retaliation, against those who start its

use. This involves three main functions: the police; the military; and the courts (which provide the means of resolving disputes peacefully, according to objective rules).

The government of a free society is prohibited from emulating the criminals it is created to apprehend. It is prohibited from initiating force against innocent men. It cannot inject the power of physical destruction into the lives of peaceful citizens, not for any purpose or in any realm of endeavor, including the realm of production and trade.

This means the rejection of any dichotomy between political and economic freedom. It means the separation of state and economics. It means the only alternative to tyranny that has ever been discovered: laissez-faire capitalism.

Historically, capitalism worked brilliantly, and it is the only system that will work. Socialism in every variant has led to disaster and will again whenever it is tried. Yet socialism is admired by mankind's teachers, while capitalism is damned. The source of this inversion is the fact that freedom is selfish, rights are selfish, capitalism is selfish.

It is true that freedom, rights, and capitalism are selfish. It is also true that selfishness, properly defined, is the good.

There is no future for the world except through a rebirth of the Aristotelian approach to philosophy. This would require an Aristotelian affirmation of the reality of existence, of the sovereignty of reason, of life on earth—and of the splendor of man.

Aristotle and Objectivism agree on fundamentals and, as a result, on this last point, also. Both hold that man *can* deal with reality, can achieve values, can live *non*-tragically. Neither believes in man the worm or man the monster; each upholds man the thinker and therefore man the hero. Aristotle calls him "the great-souled man." Ayn Rand calls him Howard Roark, or John Galt.

In every era, by their nature, men must struggle: they must work, knowingly or not, to actualize some vision of the human potential, whether consistent or contradictory, exalted or debased. They must, ultimately, make a fundamental choice, which determines their other choices and their fate. The fundamental choice, which is always the same, is the epistemological choice: reason or non-reason.

Since men's grasp of reason and their versions of non-reason differ from era to era, according to the extent of their knowledge and their virtue, so does the specific form of the choice, and its specific result.

In the ancient world, after centuries of a gradual decline, the choice was the ideas of classical civilization or the ideas of Christianity. Men chose Christianity. The result was the Dark Ages.

In the medieval world, a thousand years later, the choice was Augustine or Aquinas. Men chose Aquinas. The result was the Renaissance.

In the Enlightenment world, four centuries later, the founders of America struggled to reaffirm the choice of their Renaissance ancestors, but they could not make it stick historically. The result was a magnificent new country, with a built-in self-destructor.

Today, in the United States, the choice is the Founding Fathers and the foundation they never had, or Kant and destruction. The result is still open.