

## FIRST PLACE



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Capitalism's defenders usually appeal to the "public good" as the moral justification of capitalism. Contrast this approach to defending capitalism with Ayn Rand's approach in *Atlas Shrugged*. In your answer, consider what Rand has to say in her 1965 essay "What Is Capitalism?"

### WEALTH OF NATIONS MEN

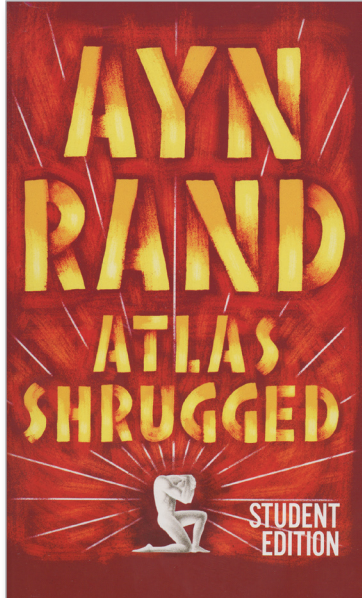
"Who is the public? What does it hold as its good?" (443)

This challenge to the notion of "the public good," launched by one of *Atlas Shrugged's* industrialist avatars, Hank Rearden, captures the contempt that Ayn Rand had for the concept, both as the presumed aim of any civil order, including capitalism, and as something that can be objectively defined.

The uninitiated tend to regard *Atlas Shrugged's* message, and by extension its author's philosophy, as a variant of the rather cliché defense of capitalism. This defense is often trotted out from behind candidates' podiums and is a more digestible, politically expedient argument for a system to which Rand assigned a more philosophically profound value.

A synoptic blurb for such a defense could read, "Unfettered Capitalism is the best economic system because the free market most efficiently allocates resources among the community, and this results in the greatest level of prosperity for all." The typical defense of capitalism, like that of most socioeconomic models, presupposes that the principle criterion for measuring a social system is the extent to which it promotes the public well-being, or to use another of Rand's least favorite terms, "the social surplus." Fellow philosopher and free market apologist, Adam Smith, may have been happy to extol capitalism from this moral foundation, but certainly not Ayn Rand. For Rand, this argument is tantamount to defending Christianity by extolling the geometric elegance of the cross. Channeling Francisco D'Anconia, she would likely remind the subscribing scholar, with no shortage of reproach, to "check your premises."

We see Rand's unique defense of capitalism in *What is Capitalism?* In the essay, Rand rejects morality on the basis of the collective, be it the village, the state, or mankind. By refusing a moral discussion viewed through the prism of the tribe's well-being, she jettisons the "public good" from its pedestal in favor of the rights of the individual. In doing so, she puts man above mankind. In the essay, she states that, for opponents and advocates alike, "If capitalism is to be understood, it is the *tribal* premise that has to be checked—and challenged." (2). Rand rejects the moral legitimacy of maximizing societal benefit, of prioritizing the community above the man. Her love of capitalism stems not from the wealth it produces, but the basic rights it protects.



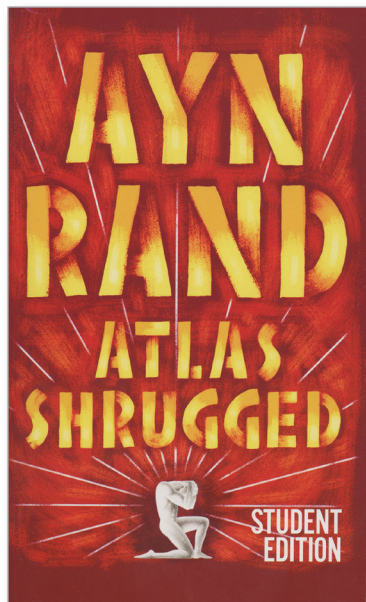
Ayn Rand views the wealth created by capitalism as a logical product of the freedom it affords to man, whose greatest asset is his freedom to make rational decisions in his self-interest, but she does not measure capitalism's value by the size of the community coffers. Rand goes much further in her defense of capitalism by recognizing it as the only objectively moral system, and dismissing the notion of collective wellbeing as nebulous in its definition, irrelevant to the discussion of government, and perilous in its potential for tyranny by the majority.

Rand instead celebrates capitalism, in its pure, unadulterated form, as the system which truly carries out the only objectively moral purpose of government: to protect man's right to his property and to protect him from harm by others. These two protections give him the freedom to rationally pursue his self-interests, which results in the productivity growth which "society," the individuals in the aggregate, enjoy. According to Rand, the mainstream defends capitalism from a misinformed vantage point, often seeing it as an unseemly process toward a greater moral benefit, the prosperity of society. In other words, the sausage may be ugly in its making, but the product is worth it. To Rand, the process *is* the product. The true beauty of capitalism is in its permission and promotion of man's fundamental right to private property. Says Rand in *What is Capitalism*: "It is the institution of private property that protects and implements the right to disagree—and thus keeps the road open to man's most valuable attribute (valuable personally, socially, and objectively): the creative mind." (3)

The heroes of *Atlas Shrugged*, though varied in other facets of their morality, embody Rand's philosophical value of capitalism by rationally pursuing their own self-interest and moving society forward as a result. Industrialists Hank Rearden and Ken Danagger, both self-made men who made their fortunes by the sheer force of their own efforts and intellectual power, are willing to break the law in their conduct of business. They are merciless in their tactics and competitive drive, and expect no different from their adversaries. Many proponents of capitalism might have balked at Rand's choice of characterization. On the contrary, they are the story's heroes not in spite of, but because of these qualities.

The eighteen-year-old boy who would become Hank Rearden is described as having "clear, steady, ruthless eyes, the eyes of a man who drove himself without pity toward that which he wanted." (211) For Rand, Rearden is the embodiment of the moral perfection of capitalism. His ruthlessness, persistence, and innovation propelled him to success, to the accumulation of property perhaps through brutal competition, but without theft or physical harm. His wealth is wholly his own, the result of his efforts, and through his innovation and pursuit of rational self-interest, value is created.

The heroes of Rand's ideals also serve as its martyrs in the book, and further distinguish Rand as having a more profound moral basis in her defense of capitalism. Characters such as Rearden and the Colorado Industrialists ultimately are ruined by the "well-intentioned" intervention of the government. Initially, the United States narrowly avoids going the way of the People's States that comprise its periphery by maintaining some vestiges of capitalism, but it slips further into demise as these vestiges continue to erode. The government's overstepping of its proper role, as aloof guarantor of individual rights, spells disaster for the economy. The government begins "picking winners and losers," a phrase all too familiar in our modern political discourse, and industry crumbles as a result.



However, unlike the typical defenders of capitalism, Rand may argue that rather than the loss of economic prosperity as the tragic ending, the true tragedy lies in the act of intervention itself. The seizing of even a dollar of the industrialists' earned property is more tragic than all of the jobs lost by "the tribe" as a result of the government's ham-fisted participation, because it constituted a violation of the individuals' fundamental rights and an abdication of the government's sole duty.

While *Atlas Shrugged* depicts the disciples of "economic equality" in a rather conventional way—as often well-intended villains whose distraction by subjective ideals effect the destruction of value in an attempt to more fairly distribute it—she offers a subtle admonishment to the predominant capitalist narrative as well. She presents morally diverse characters as champions of industry, from the Machiavellian D'Anconia to the ruthless Rearden. By giving these characters conventionally amoral personality traits, she challenges the reader to recognize their greatness and where it comes from: their unbridled industry and innovation.

In *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn Rand does not defend capitalism as the most practical solution to the problem of how to create a more prosperous society. Rather, she rejects the idea of a prosperous society as the objective of a political philosophy in favor of the protection of an individual's right to property. While affirming that capitalism fosters innovation and advancement, she dismisses the moral legitimacy of maximizing societal benefit, of prioritizing the community above the man. Her love of capitalism stems not from the wealth it produces, but the basic rights it protects. Rather than a capitalist for its product, which typifies the adherent both then and now, she is a capitalist for its process.

## Bibliography

Rand, Ayn: *Atlas Shrugged*, 1957

Rand, Ayn: *What is Capitalism?* 1965