

# No, Ayn Rand Did Not Want Us to Be Selfish

In modern America, February 2 is best known as Groundhog Day. But it also marks the birth of one of the most praised and criticized thinkers of the past century – Ayn Rand.

Rand sold more than 30 million books. *Atlas Shrugged* has been ranked behind only the Bible as an influence on readers' lives. She has also been stridently attacked for issues such as her militant atheism. But perhaps least understood has been her full-bore rejection of altruism. On her birthday, it is worth reconsideration.

Altruism has commonly been held up as the standard for moral behavior. But Rand rejected it, asserting it was “incompatible with freedom, with capitalism, and with individual rights,” and therefore “the basic evil behind today's ugliest phenomena.”

That head-on collision arises from French philosopher Auguste Comte, coiner of the term altruism. The [altruists.org](http://altruists.org) website says he believed “the *only* moral acts were those intended to promote the happiness of others.” Comte's *Catechisme Positiviste* asserts that altruism “gives a direct sanction exclusively to our instincts of benevolence,” and, therefore, “cannot tolerate the notion of rights, for such a notion rests on individualism.”

In Comte's view, any act performed for any reason beyond solely that of advancing someone else's well-being is not morally justified. That implies taking a tax deduction for a charitable act strips it of its morality. The same is true when done because “what goes around comes around.” Something as seemingly innocuous as feeling good about doing good also fails Comte's joyless standards. Even “love your neighbor as

yourself" fails his unlimited duty of altruism. As George H. Smith summarized it, "One should love one's neighbor *more* than oneself."

Ayn Rand's attacks on altruism are aimed at Comte's definition. However, modern usage has eroded his meaning of altruism to little more than a synonym for generosity, so Rand's rejection of the original meaning is now often taken as a rejection of generosity, which it is not. In Roderick Long's words,

*... her sometimes misleading rhetoric about the "virtue of selfishness"... was not to advocate the pursuit of one's own interest at the expense of others ... she rejected not only the subordination of one's interest to those of others, (and it is this, rather than mere benevolence, that she labeled "altruism"), but also the subordination of others' interest to one's own.*

Rand's categorical rejection of altruism was a rejection of Comte's requirement of total selflessness, because that was inconsistent with any individuals mattering for their own sake. Rand vehemently opposed such an invalidation of individuals' significance.

*The basic principle of altruism is that man has no right to exist for his own sake, that service to others is the only justification of his existence, and that self-sacrifice is his highest moral duty, virtue, and value.*

Rand's "virtue of selfishness" was a response to Comte's demand for complete selflessness. Not only is a requirement for everyone to completely disregard themselves an unattainable ideal, it is self-contradictory. You cannot possibly sacrifice yourself fully for me, while I am also sacrificing myself fully for you. And if no one has any intrinsic value, why would the results, even if possible, be

meritorious? With Comte as a starting point, more attention to people's own well-being – more selfishness, in Rand's terminology – is the only way to move toward recognizing value in each individual and significance in each life.

Comte's conception of altruism is also inconsistent with liberty, which was Ayn Rand's focus. The duty to put others first at all times and in all circumstances denies self-ownership and the power to choose that derives from it. Everyone else maintains never-ending presumptive claims on every individual, overriding any rights they may have. In contrast, benevolence involves voluntary choices to benefit others of one's own choosing, in ways and to the extent individuals choose for themselves.

This is why Rand criticized equating altruism with benevolence. The key distinction is between benevolence's individual discretion, which recognizes our rights over ourselves and our resources, and altruism's unconditional requirement to always sacrifice for others.

An omnipresent duty of self-sacrifice also makes people vulnerable to manipulation by those who disguise power over others as “really” a means to attain some noble goal. The desire to sacrifice for the good of others can be transformed into the requirement to sacrifice to the desires of leaders. As Rand expressed it:

*Those who start by saying: “It is selfish to pursue your own wishes, you must sacrifice them to the wishes of others” – end up by saying: “It is selfish to uphold your convictions, you must sacrifice them to the convictions of others.”*

The key here is Rand's emphasis on duty:

*When A needs something, in B's opinion, if C, who can do something about it refuses ... C is pilloried as someone who is selfish rather than altruistic for not choosing to support*

*B's cause. The faulty syllogism remains that "C is failing to do his duty here. C should do his duty. So C should be made to do it." And ... that syllogism as a bludgeon remains an ever-present threat from everyone who wants to do good with someone else's resources, and finds coercion an acceptable mechanism.*

To Rand, Comte's view of altruism is logically impossible, joyless, and liberty-excluding, and has enabled vast harms to be imposed on vast numbers. It does not deserve deference as a guide to morality. However, Rand offers no criticism of voluntary benevolence. That is why we should still care about her objections to altruism, which we now mistakenly take to mean whatever voluntary individual choices people make to be generous to others.

Rand reminds us of the central defense against the threat of coercion lurking beyond altruistic demands placed on people. It lies in protecting individual self-ownership and the property rights that derive from it. When that is maintained as fundamental, my power to choose what to do with myself and my property – including when my conclusion is, "I could contribute to cause X, but I choose not to" – is accepted as legitimate. Thus we would soundly reject the view that "Apart from such times as [someone] manages to perform some act of self-sacrifice, he possesses no moral significance."

Without the coercive violation of rights, liberty can be maintained. The vast majority of people would not only be generous, they would have far more to be generous with. Their voluntary arrangements, including their chosen generosity, creates a better world than Comte's altruism.



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