

What Is Objectivism?

CRAIG BIDDLE

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It is widely believed today that our moral, cultural, and political alternatives are limited either to the ideas of the secular, relativistic left—or to those of the religious, absolutist right—or to some compromised mixture of the two. In other words, one's ideas are supposedly either extremely “liberal” or extremely “conservative” or somewhere in between. Ayn Rand's philosophy, Objectivism, rejects this false alternative and offers an entirely different view of the world.

Objectivism is fully secular *and* absolutist; it is neither liberal nor conservative nor anywhere in between. It recognizes and upholds the secular (this-worldly) source and nature of moral principles and the secular moral foundations of a fully free, fully civilized society.

Morally, Objectivism advocates the virtues of rational self-interest—virtues such as independent thinking, productiveness, justice, honesty, and self-responsibility. Culturally, Objectivism advocates scientific advancement, industrial progress, objective (as opposed to “progressive” or faith-based) education, romantic art—and, above all, reverence for the faculty that makes all such values possible: reason. Politically, Objectivism advocates pure, laissez-faire capitalism—the social system of individual rights and strictly limited government—along with the whole moral and philosophical structure on which it depends.

Rand described Objectivism as “a philosophy for living on earth.” The reason why it is a philosophy for living on Earth is that its every principle is *derived* from the observable facts of reality and the demonstrable requirements of human life and happiness.

Craig Biddle is editor of *The Objective Standard* and author of *Loving Life: The Morality of Self-Interest and the Facts that Support It* and of the forthcoming *Thinking in Principles: The Science of Selfishness*.

As a philosophical system, Objectivism includes a view of the nature of reality, of man's means of knowledge, of man's nature and means of survival, of a proper morality, of a proper social system, and of the nature and value of art. Rand presented her philosophy in her many fiction and nonfiction books, such as *The Fountainhead*, *Atlas Shrugged*, *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, and *The Romantic Manifesto*.

There is a great deal to Objectivism, much more than can be addressed in a book, let alone an essay. Moreover, neither I nor anyone else—other than Rand—can speak for Objectivism; the philosophy is precisely the body of philosophical principles set forth in her works. What follows, therefore, is an essentialized condensation of Objectivism as I see it. Any errors in the presentation are mine.

The Nature of Reality

Objectivism holds that reality is an *absolute*—that facts are facts, regardless of anyone's hopes, fears, or desires. There is a world independent of our minds to which our thinking must correspond if our ideas are to be true and therefore of practical use in living our lives, pursuing our values, and protecting our rights.

Thus, Objectivism rejects the idea that reality is ultimately determined by personal opinion or social convention or "divine decree." An individual's ideas or beliefs do not make reality what it is, nor can they directly change anything about it; they either correspond to the facts of reality, or they do not. A person might think that the sun revolves around the earth (as some people do); that does not make it so.

Likewise, the accepted ideas or norms of a society or culture have no effect on the nature of reality; they either comport with the facts of reality, or they do not. Some cultures maintain that the earth is flat, that slavery is good, and that women are mentally inferior to men. Such beliefs do not alter the nature of what *is*; they contradict it; they are false.

As to the alleged existence of a "supernatural" being who creates and controls reality, no evidence or rational argument supports such a thing. Things *in nature* can be evidence only for the existence of things *in nature* (as, for instance, the fossil record is evidence for evolution); they cannot be evidence for the existence of things "outside of nature" or "above nature" or "beyond nature." Nature is *all* there is; it is the *sum* of what exists; something "outside of nature" would be "outside of existence"—that is: nonexistent. Nature is not evidence for the existence of "supernature." There is no evidence for the existence of a "supernatural" being; there are only books, traditions, and people that *say* he exists. Evidence-free assertions,

appeals to tradition, and appeals to authority are not rational arguments; they are textbook logical fallacies.

Neither individual beliefs nor widespread agreement nor a “supernatural” being’s will has any effect on the nature of the world. Reality is not created or controlled by consciousness. Reality just *is*. Existence just exists—and everything in it is something specific; everything is what it is and can act only in accordance with its identity. A rose is a rose; it can bloom; it cannot speak. A dictatorship is a dictatorship; it destroys life; it cannot promote life. Faith is faith (i.e., the acceptance of ideas in the absence of evidence); it leads to baseless beliefs; it cannot provide knowledge.

The practical significance of this point is that if people want to achieve their goals—such as gaining knowledge, amassing wealth, achieving happiness, establishing and maintaining liberty—they must recognize and embrace the nature of reality. Reality does not bend to our desires; we must conform to its laws. If we want knowledge, we must observe reality and think; if we want wealth, we must produce it; if we want to enjoy life, we must think, plan, and act accordingly; if we want liberty, we must identify and enact its cause. We cannot achieve such goals by wishing, voting, or praying.

Man’s Means of Knowledge

Objectivism holds that *reason*—the faculty that operates by way of observation and logic—is man’s means of knowledge. Man gains knowledge by perceiving reality with his five senses, forming concepts and principles on the basis of what he perceives, checking his ideas for consistency with reality, and correcting any contradictions he discovers in his thinking. This is how scientists discover facts in their various fields, from the principles of agriculture to the existence of atoms to the structure of DNA; it is how inventors and engineers design life-enhancing machines and devices, from automobiles to heart pumps to MP3 players; it is how businessmen establish ways to produce and deliver goods and services, from refrigerators to movies to wireless Internet access; it is how doctors diagnose and cure (or treat) diseases, from polio to sickle cell anemia to breast cancer; it is how children learn language, math, and manners; it is how philosophers discover the nature of the universe, the nature of man, and the proper principles of morality, politics, and esthetics. Reason is the means by which everyone learns about the world, himself, and his needs. Human knowledge—*all* human knowledge—is a product of perceptual observation and logical inference therefrom.

Thus, Objectivism rejects all forms of *mysticism*—the idea that knowledge can be acquired by non-sensory, nonrational means (such as faith, intuition, ESP, or any other form of “just knowing”). Objectivism equally rejects *skepticism*—the idea that knowledge is impossible, that it cannot be acquired by any means. Man clearly can acquire knowledge, has done so, and continues to do so; this is evident in the fact that he has accomplished all that he has.

In short, man has a means of knowledge; it is reason—and reason *alone*. If people want to know what is true or good or right, they must observe reality and use logic.

Man’s Nature and Means of Survival

Objectivism holds that man has *free will*—the ability to think or not to think, to use reason or not to use it, to go by facts or to go by feelings. A person does not *have* to use reason; the choice is his to make. Whatever an individual’s choice, however, the fact remains that man is the rational animal; reason *is* his only means of knowledge and therefore his basic means of survival. A person who refuses to use reason cannot live and flourish.

Man survives by observing reality, identifying the nature of things, discovering causal relationships, and making the logical connections necessary to produce the things he needs in order to live. Insofar as a person chooses to use reason, he is able to identify and pursue the things he needs for survival and happiness—things such as knowledge, food, shelter, medical care, art, recreation, romance, and freedom. Insofar as a person does *not* choose to use reason, he is unable to identify or pursue these requirements; he either dies or survives parasitically on the minds of those who *do* choose to use reason. In any case, reason is man’s basic means of survival, and free will—the choice to use reason or not—is the essence of his nature.

Thus, Objectivism rejects the notion that man’s nature is inherently corrupt (i.e., the idea of “original sin,” or the Hobbesian view of man as a brute), making his character necessarily depraved or barbaric. Objectivism also rejects the idea that man has no nature at all (i.e., the twisted, modern interpretation of man as a “blank slate”), making his character the consequence of social forces, such as upbringing or economic conditions. A person’s character is neither inherently bad nor the product of social forces; rather, it is a consequence of his *choices*. If an individual chooses to face facts, to think rationally, to be productive, and so on—and thereby develops a good character—that is his achievement. If an individual chooses not to face facts, not to think, not to produce, and so on—and thus develops a bad character—that is his fault.

Man has free will, and this fact is what gives rise to his need of morality: a code of values to guide his choices and actions.

A Proper Morality

Objectivism holds that the purpose of morality is to provide people with principled guidance for living and achieving happiness on earth. The proper standard of moral value is *man's life*—meaning: the factual requirements of his life as set by his nature. And because human beings are individuals, each with his own body, his own mind, his *own* life, this standard pertains to human beings as *individuals* (not as cogs in a utilitarian collective). According to this principle, the good is that which supports or promotes an individual's life; the evil is that which retards or destroys it. Being moral consists in taking the actions necessary to sustain and further one's life—actions such as thinking rationally and planning for the future, being honest and having integrity, producing goods or services and trading them with others, judging people rationally (according to the relevant facts) and treating them accordingly, and so on. In a word, Objectivism holds that being moral consists in being *rationally selfish* or *egoistic*.

Rational egoism, the centerpiece of Objectivism, holds that each individual should act in his own best interest and is the proper beneficiary of his own moral action. This principle is the recognition of the fact that in order to live, people *must* take self-interested action and reap the benefits thereof. Human life *requires* egoism. (I use “rational egoism” and “egoism” interchangeably for reasons that will become clear.)

Thus, Objectivism rejects the morality of *altruism*—the idea that being moral consists in self-sacrificially serving others (whether the poor, the “common good,” “mother nature,” or “God”). Objectivism also rejects the idea that *predation*—the sacrificing of others for one's own alleged benefit—can promote one's life and happiness. And Objectivism rejects *hedonism*—the idea that being moral consists in acting in whatever manner gives one pleasure (or doing whatever one feels like doing).

Consider altruism first.

Altruism, contrary to widespread misconception, is not the morality of “being nice to people” or “doing things for others”; rather, it is the morality of *self-sacrifice*—that is, of serving others at the *expense* of one's own life-serving values. The basic principle of altruism is that to be moral, an action must be *selfless*: Insofar as a person acts selflessly, he is moral; insofar as he does not, he is not. If he gives up a value for no gain whatsoever, he is being moral; if he gains something from an action, he is *not* being moral. For instance, if a volunteer social worker gives away his time and effort in exchange for nothing at all, he is being moral. If a software

developer creates a product that people love and trades it with them for a profit, he is not being moral. So says altruism. Not so says egoism.

Egoism, which also is widely misconstrued, is not the morality of “stabbing people in the back to get what one wants” or “acting on one’s unfettered desires.” These are caricatures of egoism perpetrated by pushers of altruism who want people to believe that the only alternatives are: sacrifice yourself or sacrifice others. These, according to Objectivism, are *not* the only alternatives.

Egoism is the morality of *non-sacrifice*; it rejects all forms of human sacrifice—both self-sacrifice and the sacrifice of others—as a matter of principle. It holds that being moral consists in rationally pursuing one’s life-promoting values, neither sacrificing oneself to others nor sacrificing others to oneself.

Egoism upholds the *principle of non-sacrifice*—the idea that one should never surrender a greater value for the sake of a lesser value. This principle is the recognition of the fact that giving up the requirements of one’s life and happiness is inimical to one’s life and happiness. Of course, life requires that people regularly forgo lesser values for the sake of greater ones; however, these are *gains*, not sacrifices. A *sacrifice* is the giving up of something that is *more* important to one’s life and happiness for the sake of something that is *less* important to one’s life and happiness; thus, it results in a net *loss*.

To live, people must pursue values, not give them up. According to egoism, therefore, insofar as a person pursues his life-serving values and refuses to sacrifice them, he is acting morally; insofar as he does not, he is not acting morally. If he produces values and trades them with others for a profit (whether material or spiritual), he is thereby being moral; he is gaining values on which his life and happiness depend. If he gives his values away for no gain whatsoever (neither material nor spiritual), he is thereby being immoral; he is relinquishing values on which his life and happiness depend.

On this view, a software developer who trades his product with others for a profit is thereby being moral. A volunteer social worker who gives away his time and effort for nothing at all is thereby being immoral. Likewise, a parent who values his child’s education more than he values a new sports car, and who forgoes the car in order to pay for the education, is being moral; a parent who values the education more than the car, but forgoes paying for the education in order to purchase the car, is being immoral. Similarly, a soldier who fights for freedom on the grounds that life without liberty is not worth living (“Give me liberty, or give me death!”) is being moral; one who fights in obedience to an alleged “supernatural” being’s commands is not. And so forth.

There is a black-and-white difference between trading values for gains and giving up values for nothing. Egoism calls for the first; altruism calls for the second.

Egoism is based on and derived from the requirements of human life on earth; thus, people *can* practice it consistently and *must* do so—if they want to live and make the most of their lives. Altruism *cannot* be practiced consistently. A person who accepts the morality of altruism has to cheat on it just to stay alive; for instance, he must selfishly earn a paycheck so that he can buy food.

Given the many values on which human life and happiness depend—from material values, such as food, shelter, clothing, medical care, automobiles, and computers, to spiritual values, such as knowledge, self-esteem, art, friendship, romantic love, and liberty—people need a great deal of guidance in making choices and taking actions. They need moral principles that are *conducive* to the goal of living fully and happily. In answer to this need, egoism provides a whole system of integrated, noncontradictory principles, the sole purpose of which is to teach man how to live and enjoy himself. In answer to this same need, altruism says: Don't be selfish; sacrifice your values; give up your needs. If people want to live and be happy, only one of these moralities will do.

Altruism is not good for one's life. If accepted and practiced *consistently*, it leads to death. This is what Jesus did. If accepted and practiced *inconsistently*, it retards one's life and leads to guilt. This is what most altruists do. An altruist might not die from his morality—so long as he cheats on it—but neither will he live fully. Insofar as a person acts against the requirements of his life and happiness, he will not make the most of his life; he will not achieve the kind of happiness possible to man.

Egoism *is* good for one's life. If accepted and practiced *consistently*, it leads to a life of happiness. If accepted and practiced *inconsistently*—well, there is no *reason* to be inconsistent here. Why *not* live a life of happiness? Why sacrifice *at all*? What reason is there to do so? In the entire history of philosophy, the number of rational answers to this question is exactly zero.

There is no reason to act in a self-sacrificial manner, which is why no one has ever provided one. Nor is there any rational justification for sacrificing others, which is why no one has ever provided one of these, either.

Predation (the sacrificing of others for one's own alleged benefit) is no more in one's best interest than is altruism. Happiness, like everything in the world, is something specific; it has a nature. Happiness is the state of mind that follows from the successful pursuit of rational, life-serving values. Genuine happiness comes from achieving values, not from stealing them; from thinking rationally and being

productive, not from relinquishing one's mind and becoming a parasite on the thought and effort of others; from earning romance and making passionate love, not from raping people. To willfully become a parasite on the minds, efforts, and bodies of other people—to deliberately reduce oneself to the status of a subhuman creature—is the most selfless thing a person can do. That predators choose to ignore or deny this fact does not exempt them from it. Just as the sun does not revolve around the earth (regardless of what one believes), so too a person cannot achieve happiness by sacrificing other people (regardless of what he claims).

The assertions of predators to the effect that they *can* achieve happiness by sacrificing others are just that: assertions. They are not based on evidence (a criminal's makeshift smile and stolen money are not evidence of his happiness). They do not prove anything (proof is logical inference on the basis of evidence). Moreover, such claims flatly contradict the demonstrable fact that rational thought, productive achievement, genuine (earned) self-esteem, and certainty of one's moral worth are requirements of happiness.

Ultimately, however, in a rational society, the evasions and assertions of predators are of little concern to good people. As I will indicate in the section on politics, a rational society has an efficient means of dealing appropriately with such creatures.

Finally, as to the morality of hedonism, just because someone gets pleasure from or feels like doing something does not mean that it is in his best interest to do it. This is why rational parents encourage their children to think before they act, to recognize that choices have consequences beyond the immediate moment, to learn and embrace the long-range requirements of human life and happiness. It is also why rational adults do not act on their every urge or desire, and why bums and drug addicts are not happy people.

Genuine happiness comes from identifying and pursuing the long-range material and spiritual requirements of one's life as set by one's nature. For guidance in understanding and achieving these highly complex needs, whereas egoism provides an entire system of rational explanations and principles, hedonism says: Pay no attention to your nature or needs; do whatever gives you pleasure; do whatever you feel like doing. Hedonism, in other words, under the guise of self-interest, counsels self-destruction.

It all comes down to standards. The standard of value according to altruism is self-sacrifice. The standard of value according to a predator is his whim. The standard of value according to hedonism is pleasure or feelings. The standard

of value according to Objectivism and rational egoism is the requirements of man's life.

By the standard of man's life, each individual should live his own life for his own sake. He should think rationally and pursue his own life-promoting goals, such as a wonderful career, a passionate romantic relationship, enjoyable recreational activities, great friendships, a rational culture, and a social system that protects his right to do so.

Human life does not require human sacrifice; people *can* live without giving up their minds, their values, their lives; people *can* live without murdering, assaulting, or defrauding one another. Nor can human sacrifice promote human life or happiness; it can lead only to suffering and death. If people want to live and be happy, they must neither sacrifice themselves nor sacrifice others; rather, they must pursue life-serving values and respect the rights of others to do the same. This is the basic principle of rational egoism—and the moral foundation for a proper social system.

A Proper Social System

In the realm of politics, Objectivism recognizes that in order to *take* life-promoting action, a person must be free to do so; he must be *free* to act on the judgment of his mind, his basic means of living. The only thing that can stop him from doing so is other people, and the only way they can stop him is by means of *physical force*. Thus, in order to live peacefully together in a society—in order to live together as civilized beings, rather than as barbarians—people must refrain from using physical force against one another. This fact gives rise to the principle of *individual rights*, which is the principle of egoism applied to politics.

The principle of individual rights is the recognition of the fact that each person is morally an end in himself, not a means to the ends of others; therefore, he morally must be left free to act on his own judgment for his own sake, so long as he does not violate that same right of others. This principle is not a matter of personal opinion or social convention or “divine revelation”; it is a matter of the factual requirements of human life in a social context.

A *moral* society—a *civilized* society—is one in which the initiation of physical force against human beings is prohibited by law. And the only social system in which such force *is* so prohibited—consistently and on principle—is pure, laissez-faire capitalism.

Capitalism—which, contrary to widespread miseducation, is not merely an economic system—is the social system of individual rights, including property

rights, protected by a strictly limited government. In a laissez-faire society, if people want to deal with one another, they may do so only on *voluntary* terms, by uncoerced agreement. If they want to receive goods or services from others, they may offer to exchange value for value to mutual benefit; however, they may *not* seek to gain any value from others by means of physical force. People are fully free to act on their own judgment and thus to produce, keep, use, and dispose of their own property as they see fit; the only thing they are *not* “free” to do is to violate the rights of others. In a capitalist society, individual rights cannot *legally* be violated by anyone—including the government.

The sole purpose of the government in such a system is to protect the individual rights of its citizens by means of the police (to deal with domestic criminals), the military (to deal with foreign aggressors), and the courts of law (to adjudicate disputes). Although the government holds a monopoly on the legal use of force, it is constitutionally forbidden to use *initiatory* force in any way whatsoever—and constitutionally required to use *retaliatory* force as necessary to protect the rights of its citizens.

For instance, the government is *forbidden* to seize the property of innocent people (e.g., eminent domain), to forcibly redistribute wealth (e.g., welfare), to dictate the terms of private contracts (e.g., minimum wage and antitrust laws), to restrict freedom of speech (e.g., campaign finance “reform”), to mandate motherhood (e.g., antiabortion laws), to block scientific advancement (e.g., embryonic stem-cell research), to force citizens to fund religious organizations (e.g., faith-based initiatives), and to mandate “community” or “national” service (e.g., mandatory “volunteerism”). Simultaneously, the government is *required* to enforce laws against murder, assault, rape, child abuse, fraud, extortion, copyright infringement, slander, and the like. The government is also *required* to summarily dispose of foreign aggressors who initiate or threaten to initiate force against its citizens or their interests.

Capitalism—not the mongrel system of the United States today, but *genuine* capitalism—is the only social system that consistently prohibits anyone, including the government, from assaulting people or stealing their property. It is the only system that respects and protects individual rights as a matter of unwavering principle. In other words, capitalism is the only system that *institutionalizes* the requirements of human life in a social context. No other social system on earth does this. Thus, if man’s life is the standard of moral value, capitalism is the only moral social system.

In advocating laissez-faire capitalism, Objectivism opposes the politics of conservatism—such as the notion that we are our “brothers’ keepers” and therefore must sacrificially serve strangers (e.g., Republican welfare programs); the notion that successful businessmen should be regulated (i.e., coerced) “at least to some extent” for the sake of the “little guy” (as if the so-called little guy cannot succeed in life by his own rational thinking); the notion that students in government-run schools should be indoctrinated with “intelligent design” theory or required to pray; the notion that scientists should be forbidden to engage in embryonic stem-cell research while men, women, and children suffer from agonizing diseases that might otherwise be cured (“We mustn’t play God”)—and that those suffering from such diseases should be forced to “live” when they desperately want to die (“We mustn’t play God”); the notion that homosexuals should be prohibited from experiencing the joy of sex (“God disapproves”); and the notion that America’s military should sacrificially spread “freedom” (“God’s gift to mankind”), much less “democracy” (i.e., unlimited majority rule) to savages rather than selfishly and swiftly destroy America’s major enemies (“Love your enemies”).

Objectivism equally opposes the politics of so-called liberalism—such as the notion that people have a “right” to be *given* goods or services (which obviously requires that someone be *forced* to provide them); the notion that government agencies, private businesses, and schools should be required to implement racist policies, such as “affirmative action” and “diversity training”; the notion that students in government-run schools should be indoctrinated with the relativism known as “multiculturalism” or the religion known as “environmentalism”; the notion that people should be forced to fund ideas or art of which they disapprove (e.g., via “public” radio or “public” grants); and the notion that America has no right to “interfere with” or “impose Western values on” (let alone destroy) regimes that are responsible for the slaughter of Americans.

Finally, Objectivism emphatically opposes the politics of libertarianism—the anti-intellectual movement that claims to advocate “liberty,” while flagrantly ignoring or denying the moral and philosophical foundations on which liberty depends. Liberty cannot even be defined, let alone *defended*, apart from answers to questions such as: What is the nature of reality? What is man’s means of knowledge? What is the nature of the good? What are rights, and where do they come from? To say, as libertarians do, that the “non-initiation-of-force principle” is an “axiom” or that liberty can be defended on any old philosophical base—whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, atheist, altruist, egoistic, subjectivist, relativist, postmodernist—or on no base at all—is simply absurd. (This is not to say that

everyone who calls himself a libertarian is anti-intellectual; rather, it is to say that any attempt to defend liberty while ignoring or denying its intellectual foundations is anti-intellectual.)

Contrary to conservatism, “liberalism,” and libertarianism, the politics of freedom *depends* on the ethics of egoism—which depends on the philosophy of reason—which is grounded in the basic nature of reality: the fact that things (including human beings) are what they are and can act (and live) only in accordance with their identities. The politics of freedom *is* the politics of self-interest; it cannot be defended with the ethics of self-sacrifice—or with a philosophy of unreason, unreality, or “super-nature”—or with no philosophy at all.

Objectivists are not conservatives, but, as Rand put it, “radicals for capitalism” (i.e., advocates of its *root* or *foundation*). Objectivists are not “liberals,” but absolutists for freedom. Objectivists are not libertarians, but fundamentalists for liberty. This is because Objectivists are radicals for *reason*—the foundation of which is: reality.

Let us turn now to art, which, according to Objectivism, like ethics and politics, rests on a rational, objective foundation and serves a specific life-promoting purpose.

The Nature and Value of Art

Objectivism holds that art is a requirement of human life and happiness. Art is a selective re-creation of reality according to an artist’s deepest, most fundamental convictions—such as his views of the nature of the universe, the nature of man, what is knowable, what matters most, what is possible. The purpose of art is to give physical form to such profound abstractions, to make them concrete and observable, and thereby to provide people with a perceptual representation of a particular idea or worldview. This enables people to examine the idea as a physical reality and thus to better understand what it means in practice. In this way, art provides spiritual guidance and fuel for living and achieving one’s goals. Whether a sculpture of a ballerina depicting the skill and grace possible to man—or a novel about great industrialists showing the productive achievement possible to man—or a landscape of a countryside portraying the world as open to man’s investigation and enjoyment—or a painting of a dismal, psychedelic pool hall portraying the world as unstable and inhospitable to man—art brings highly abstract convictions to the perceptual level.

Like everything in the world, art is something specific; thus, it is both knowable and definable. And, like everything man-made, it is properly judged as good or bad by the standard of the requirements of human life on earth.

Thus, Objectivism rejects the idea that art is whatever any self-proclaimed or allegedly “accomplished” artist happens to slap together or place in a gallery. Neither paint randomly splattered on a canvas, nor a bicycle wheel “cleverly” fastened to a stool, nor a word salad neatly printed on a page is art. Such things are not “bad” art; they are not art at all. Art is not the emotional spewing of irrational impulses, but the selective recreation of reality. Because man grasps reality only by means of reason, the creation of art requires the intense use of this faculty; it requires thought, concentration, mental connections, and the transformation of highly abstract concepts and values into the material of perceptual reality. This is not the province of buffoonery; it is the province of genius—and should be recognized and guarded as such.

Objectivism also rejects the idea that, within the range of what *is* art, no objective criteria exist for judging certain works as better than others. Like every legitimate value, a work of art—whether a painting, sculpture, novel, movie, or symphony—is a value precisely to the extent that it serves some requirement of a rational being’s life. Although there is plenty of room for different tastes within the range of genuine art, there are also within that range objectively better and worse works of art—better and worse by the standards of rationality and man’s spiritual needs.

For instance, because the essence of man’s nature is that he possesses free will, the best art—*romantic* art—reflects this fact; it depicts man as in control of his life, as capable of reshaping his world according to his values, as the self-made soul that he is. For the sake of example here, let us isolate a particular aspect of a work of art: its subject matter. All else being equal (style, composition, technique, etc.), a painting of a hideous woman screaming in terror on the deck of a sinking ship says one thing; a painting of a beautiful woman masterfully handling a catamaran on a windy day says another. Objectively speaking, two such paintings do not have “equal” value; they do not “equally” serve the purpose of art; and they are not “equally” enjoyed by rational people.

Good art—like everything else on which human life and happiness depend—is a product of rational thought and creative effort. This is yet another reason to embrace and advocate capitalism—and the entire philosophy of reason on which it is based. In a rational, capitalist society, artists are fully free to think and to create as they see fit; nothing stands in their way; the right to freedom of expression is recognized as an absolute. Because the guiding social principle in such a society is that of trade—and because there is no “public” funding of the arts—artists who

produce works that rational people value tend to thrive; those who produce works that rational people do not value tend to find other professions.

In sum, the key principles of Objectivism are: Reality is an absolute, reason is man's only means of knowledge, man has free will (the choice to think or not), self-interest is moral, individual rights are absolute, capitalism is moral, and good art is crucial to good living.

To see the origin of these principles in Rand's fiction, read *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. For a book-length nonfiction presentation of the principles of Objectivism, see Leonard Peikoff's *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*. For the application of these principles to cultural and political issues of the day, subscribe to *The Objective Standard*, the preeminent source for commentary from an Objectivist perspective.