



Understanding Ayn Rand

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Who is John Galt?

This is one of the most famous questions in modern literature. Even today, over 50 years after it was written, you'll hear people asking it. Why? Because it recalls the riveting suspense story, heroic characters, and powerful ideas portrayed in the bestselling novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, by Ayn Rand.

Born in St. Petersburg, Russia on February 2, 1905, Rand became one of the most celebrated authors and philosophers of the 20th century. Her most famous novels, *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, still sell hundreds of thousands of copies every year around the world.

Rand lived through the early years of the Russian Revolution, saw her father's pharmacy business confiscated by the Bolsheviks, and experienced the horrors of communism firsthand. She longed to emigrate to America. In 1926, she did—and never looked back.

To Rand, the United States meant freedom. She saw the Founding Fathers as heroes. They created a country based on individual rights. "Man's right to his own life, to his own liberty, to the pursuit of his own happiness," she said, means that every individual has a "right to exist for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself"—nor to the government.

The practical results of the American system, Rand said, could be seen in the skyline of New York City. "America's skyscrapers," she noted, "were not built by public funds nor for a public purpose: they were built by the energy, initiative, and wealth of private individuals for personal profit. And, instead of impoverishing the people, these skyscrapers, as they rose higher and higher, kept raising the people's standard of living."

Rand advocated pure capitalism, which she described as a system in which "the government acts only as a policeman that protects man's rights." No bailouts, no special favors for big business, no government intervention into the economy.

When people are free to produce and trade, and when the government is limited to protecting rights, everyone benefits. Individuals thrive. Societies prosper.

How do we know this?

Compare freer, more capitalist societies to less free, more statist ones—in Rand's day: America compared to the Soviet Union; West Germany to East Germany. More recently: South Korea to

North Korea; Colombia to Venezuela.

Such differences were painfully obvious to Rand. So were their causes. In *Atlas Shrugged*, she showed how easily a free society can collapse into a dictatorship. The heroine, Dagny Taggart, works tirelessly and brilliantly to save her family's railroad business while ever-increasing government interventions destroy businesses and crush the economy. Meanwhile, one by one, the top producers across various industries mysteriously disappear. No one knows where they have gone. The only clue is a question they leave behind: Who is John Galt?

As the economy crumbles, how do politicians, bureaucrats and academics react? They blame "the greedy businessman" and decry the profit motive and free markets. Their solution: more government intervention—which, of course, only makes the problem worse.

Sound familiar?

Atlas Shrugged is a cautionary tale about pursuing equality over excellence, state control over free markets, but it's also about the power of the individual and the power of reason. The individual's reasoning mind, Rand argued, is his tool of knowledge—his only means of understanding what is true or false, how the world works, what is good or bad for his life.

This is the theme of Rand's work more broadly: In order to thrive, to achieve happiness, the individual must think for himself and live by the judgment of his own mind. To do this, people must be free—free to voluntarily exchange ideas, goods, and services for mutual benefit; free to speak their minds without fear. For this, she regarded capitalism not only as the best, but as the only, moral social system.

"Capitalism does not tell men to suffer, but to pursue enjoyment and achievement," she argued. "Capitalism does not preach passivity, humility, resignation, but independence, self-confidence, self-reliance." Above all, Rand emphasized, capitalism does not permit anyone to expect or demand the unearned.

Is this the system America lives under now? No, said Rand. She called capitalism the "unknown ideal" because it has never been fully implemented—even in America.

Ayn Rand's ideas on capitalism, individualism, and reason have attracted millions of people to her novels, essays, and lectures—and still do.

Who is John Galt?

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