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No Tributes to Caesar

Good or Evil in *Atlas Shrugged*

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Atlas Shrugged helps us to understand the life-and-death consequences of rationality and irrationality. Correlatively, it illustrates the inescapability of value choices. By demonstrating how the law of excluded middle plays out in the realm of human action, Ayn Rand vividly dramatizes how every choice that a person makes is good or evil insofar as it carries repercussions on his existence. Only with a firm grasp of this fact can we fully understand the action of the novel. This fundamental “either-or” also explains the absolutist character of Rand’s moral philosophy.

To help us digest the significance of Rand’s insight, this paper will examine the choice between good and evil. In particular, it will focus on the mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive nature of these alternatives to make plain their life-or-death consequences. It will proceed in four stages. First, to indicate morality’s roots in the issue of life or death, I will outline Rand’s view of the basic nature of value. Second, we will trace pivotal elements in the protagonists’ steadily increasing understanding of the character of their alternatives over the course of the story. Next, we will observe how this increased knowledge alters their course of action. Finally and more briefly, we will indicate how the “either-or,” mutually exclusive character of this alternative dictates the absolutist character of Rand’s moral code. All of this, I believe, will help the reader to understand the theme of *Atlas Shrugged*—the role of the mind in human existence—more richly.¹

THE NATURE AND FOUNDATIONS OF VALUE

To understand the life-or-death stakes of morality’s authority and the inescapability of value choices, we must first understand Rand’s view of what morality is. While this is a large subject that warrants extensive explanation in its own right, a basic sketch must suffice here.²

In *Atlas*, Rand illustrates how morality and rationality go hand in hand. “Man’s reason *is* his moral faculty,” Galt observes, and “thinking is man’s only basic virtue” (1017, emphasis in original). The rational is the moral. Rand was led to this conclusion by investigating the roots of morality.³

“Morality is a code of values to guide man’s choices and actions—the choices and actions that determine the purpose and the course of his life.”⁴ But, Rand asks, why should a person be moral? On what grounds does it make sense to consider certain things good or

valuable? What she finds, in answer, is that it is only in relation to living organisms that anything can be good or bad. For inanimate objects, no values exist. Nothing can be good or bad for a bench or a clock or a stone insofar as these entities have nothing to gain or to lose as a result of anything's effects on them. "Gains" and "losses" are possible only in relation to some end. Indeed, this is precisely how we measure gains and losses: by things' impact on the achievement (or maintenance) of a goal. As Rand explains,

"Value" is that which one acts to gain and/or keep. The concept "value" is not a primary; it presupposes an answer to the question: of value to *whom* and for *what*? It presupposes an entity capable of acting to achieve a goal in the face of an alternative. Where no alternative exists, no goals and no values are possible.⁵

Values arise, in other words, only in relation to entities that pursue an end whose achievement stands to be positively or negatively affected by those entities' actions.

Since life literally is a process of self-generating and self-sustaining action, living beings do have such an end: their continued existence.⁶ To be a living entity is to be engaged in the process of self-*sustaining* action. (To the extent that an entity is not engaged in such action, it is not functioning as a living organism.) In relation to that end (its existence), various things can be beneficial or harmful. This is not to imply that all human beings necessarily embrace that end or adopt their existence as a conscious objective. Man is free to reject his life and to suffer the consequences. The point, rather, is that ends make possible benefits. Apart from their relation to an end, the concept of "benefits" would be meaningless.

Living organisms are not simply helpless, passive recipients of external events' impact, however. Their actions affect their survival. Thus it is important to appreciate that this, more specifically, is what gives rise to the phenomenon of values. It enables us to identify certain objects of organisms' actions as objectively good for them.

All living organisms need to act in ways that sustain their existence. Accordingly, that which is conducive to the existence of an organism is good for it; that which is detrimental is bad. For a plant, absorbing sunlight or water might be a value; for a given animal, the acquisition of nuts or berries or a safe environment to hibernate. For a human being, food or money or knowledge or friendship would typically be values. Obviously, particulars vary with the species.⁷ The shared basis for all values, however, is the fact that organisms' existence depends on their acting in ways that sustain their existence.

For all of human beings' similarity with other organisms, the distinctive way in which human beings confront the alternative of existence or nonexistence creates our unique need for morality. Because human beings volitionally select our actions, we must rationally evaluate our options, identifying things' probable impact on our lives in order to pursue those things that offer a positive contribution and to avoid those that threaten harm. Only the former are objective values. A person *should* seek to gain and to keep certain things, in other words—and he requires guidance from a moral code that identifies objective values—only if and because he seeks his existence. What underwrites morality's authority is causality: if a man seeks a certain end, he must respect its necessary conditions and enact the requisite means by achieving appropriate values. A rational moral code is designed to guide him in doing this. Without the desire to live, the mandate for morality dissolves; no moral "shoulds" are warranted.⁸ (This explains Galt's statement that a moral "commandment" is a contradiction in terms [1018].)

What Rand identifies, then, is the fact that for human beings, "the standard of value . . . —the standard by which one judges what is good or evil—is *man's life*, or: that which is required

for man's survival *qua* man."⁹ And a man's own life is his proper purpose. Rand stresses that "life" refers not only to physical subsistence, but to the overall fit and healthy condition of an organism such that it is poised to prosper in the future. Insofar as human beings are mental as well as material beings and insofar as a man's psychological and physical conditions affect one another, the standard of life subsumes the condition of a man's psyche (his beliefs, values, emotional dispositions, cognitive methods, and the like).¹⁰ What is important for our purposes is that this standard provides the basis for the identification of objective values. That is, the basis for distinguishing between those things that truly are in a person's interest and those things that are treated as such by particular individuals, but which are not, in fact. While their dimension can vary considerably, all objective values offer some positive net contribution to a person's well-being.¹¹ (Henceforth, my references to "values" will be restricted to values for human beings, unless the context clearly indicates otherwise.)

Because morality's authority is contingent on a person's embrace of his life—his desire for his continued existence—it is important to have a sound understanding of what this is. The "choice to live" does not consist of a purely intellectual preference for a clinical medical status, exerted on an isolated occasion. Rather, it is a wholehearted commitment manifested in countless actions that a person takes every day. A man chooses to live by conducting his days in a life-advancing manner, by seeking to make his life go as well as possible, by actively and continuously going after goals that enhance it. The man who truly embraces his life treats his flourishing as the overriding reason for all that he does.¹² This stance is palpable in *Atlas'* heroes. And it is noticeably absent among the villains.

Notice that certain of the villains' ends which would normally function as values in a person's life do not, for them. Jim's money, for instance, is sterile. It does nothing life-nourishing for him. His wealth does not result from his own life-supporting action and is not used by him to achieve his objective well-being. This does not mean that he might not enjoy having money; by pretending that it proves something about his relative merit vis-à-vis others, Jim occasionally takes a fleeting reassurance from it. But his wealth does not represent his achievement of objective values and does not actually further his life.

Similarly, Lillian's marriage is not a genuine value for her. The desire to exert a perverse sense of moral superiority over Hank and her anticipation of pleasure in catching her husband with his mistress reveal her ends as anything but healthy (525–26). Her marriage to Hank does not reflect a celebration of his objective value to her, nor of the fact that she is a value to him; rather, it reflects Lillian's futile desire to gain value through the destruction of another man's virtue. She belittles the bracelet made of Rearden Metal (which *is* a value to Dagny and to Hank) and sleeps with Jim only as a testament to their common wish to deface values (900).

A different kind of case to consider is Taggart Transcontinental. Dagny treats the railroad as a value through most of the book, until she finally joins the strike. Yet her viewing it as a life-serving enterprise does not make it so. Attitude does not determine the positive or negative effects that things carry for human existence. While the railroad was a great value to many, in its earlier history, its value is not intrinsic. Its ability to serve anyone's life cannot withstand the abuses imposed by the looters. As distorted by altruist demands and coercive restrictions, the sad fact that Dagny finally confronts is that her beloved railroad, and her work in directing it, are no longer a constructive contributor to her life.¹³

These are just a few examples of how characters in *Atlas* do or do not embrace their lives. When it comes to spelling out a code of morality to guide the man who does wish to live, Rand identifies the central principle as rationality. For this is the fundamental requirement of our

existence. Human beings must deliberately utilize our powers of conceptual thought in order to create the values that satisfy our needs. “Man’s mind is his basic tool of survival,” Galt observes.

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. (1012)

As Rand elaborates elsewhere,

For an animal, the question of survival is primarily physical; for man, primarily epistemological.

Man’s unique reward, however, is that while animals survive by adjusting themselves to their background, man survives by adjusting his background to himself. If a drought strikes them, animals perish—man builds irrigation canals; if a flood strikes them, animals perish—man builds dams; if a carnivorous pack attacks them animals perish—man writes the Constitution of the United States. But one does not obtain food, safety or freedom—by instinct.¹⁴

All of this should help us to understand the bond between reason and morality expressed in Galt’s declaration that a man’s basic moral choice “in every hour and every issue” is “thinking or non-thinking, existence or non-existence” (1018). Given that values are grounded in the alternative between existence and nonexistence, every decision that stands to further or detract from a man’s existence is an issue of morality. Correspondingly, the choice between good and evil that a man confronts in any of his actions is, at root, the choice between life and death. The questions “Should I be moral or immoral?” or “Should I follow rational principle or cheat?” amount to: “Should I act to live, or to die?”

UNDERSTANDING THE ALTERNATIVES

Having sketched Rand’s basic understanding of good and evil, we can now consider the way in which the central figures in *Atlas* come to appreciate this.

At the book’s opening, the men on strike understand what “choosing life,” as a human being, requires. Hank and Dagny do not. Suspended in a kind of limbo, Hank and Dagny do not consciously embrace the looters’ code, yet their actions defer to substantial portions of it. The reason is a lack of knowledge on their parts and as the story unfolds, we witness the steady growth of their understanding. When Dagny retreats to the cabin in the woods, for instance, she misframes her conflict as whether to give up on life by quitting, as so many others have, or to labor on, on the looters’ terms (611).¹⁵ Gradually, she and Hank come to appreciate that the strikers have not given up. They, uniquely, have “chosen” their lives, on a full understanding of what the terms of human life are.

Essentially, what Hank and Dagny eventually realize is that the world is animated by two basic premises—life and death—and that the alternative between them is mutually exclusive. Their opponents do not seek life, they learn, and consequently, no values can be gained from these people. Concessions to the demands of death cannot advance life. It is these realizations that convince Hank and Dagny to withdraw their sanction of irrational standards as the only way

to champion their own happiness. It is by recognizing the self-defeating character of their concessions to the looters that they finally renounce those burdens and join the strike.

The Death Premise

The evil that *Atlas'* heroes battle is not a freestanding force in the universe; it is not an anonymous, inevitable presence. While the concept of evil has acquired all sorts of murky and largely mystical connotations over the years, in fact, "evil" refers to those actions, ideas, objects, policies, and persons whose nature is essentially antagonistic to the conditions of human flourishing. Just as the good is that which advances human life, evil is that which works against it.¹⁶ The single most decisive discovery that Hank and Dagny make is that their adversaries do not value their lives. They are dedicated, instead, to what Galt calls the morality of death (1025, also see 1046–47). Whether or not they recognize this in such explicit terms, death is the goal and the standard of their course.

Through much of the plot, Hank and Dagny grant the benefit of the doubt to their adversaries, even as they impose ever more onerous demands, penalize the producers' success, and seek to inflict guilt and suffering. "Surely they're after what we're after," Hank and Dagny assume; "surely they want to live." "I can carry Jim (the railroad, the family)"; "I can endure these vacuous social appearances with Lillian"; "I can put up with their irrationalities." Particularly as the looters' political policies backfire and the resulting economic contraction intensifies, surely, Hank and Dagny expect, the others will recognize the error of their ways. In fact, however, what the heroes come to realize is that there *is* no error in the looters' course. Having accepted the premise of death, the destruction that their philosophy inflicts is what they're after.¹⁷

Notice that Hank and Dagny's charitable assumption that all people are "on the same side" is exactly what is challenged in several of their encounters with strikers. When Francisco pays a call on Rearden at his mills, Francisco tells him that he has been placing his "virtue in the service of evil" (453). Needless to say, that is hardly how Rearden views his course. Francisco explains:

You're guilty of a great sin, Mr. Rearden, much guiltier than they tell you, but not in the way they preach. The worst guilt is to accept an undeserved guilt—and that is what you have been doing all your life. You have been paying blackmail, not for your vices, but for your virtues. You have been willing to carry the load of an unearned punishment—and to let it grow the heavier the greater the virtues you practiced. But your virtues were those which keep men alive. Your own moral code—the one you lived by, but never stated, acknowledged or defended—was the code that preserves man's existence. If you were punished for it, what was the nature of those who punished you? Yours was the code of life. What, then, is theirs?" (455)

In the valley, after Dagny explains her reason for returning to the "real" world, Akston's response names the fact that she has not yet identified. She begins the exchange:

"If you want to know the one reason that's taking me back, I'll tell you: I cannot bring myself to abandon to destruction all the greatness of the world, all that which was mine and yours, which was made by us and is still ours by right—

because I cannot believe that men can refuse to see, that they can remain blind and deaf to us forever, when the truth is ours and their lives depend on accepting it. They still love their lives—and *that* is the uncorrupted remnant of their minds. So long as men desire to live, I cannot lose my battle.”

“Do they?” said Hugh Akston softly. “Do they desire it? No, don’t answer me now. I know that the answer was the hardest thing for any of us to grasp and to accept. Just take that question back with you, as the last premise left for you to check.” (807)

Consider an earlier exchange, also, in which Dagny explains her perseverance to Francisco:

She glanced at the city. “The life of a man of ability who might have perished in that catastrophe, but will escape the next one, which I’ll prevent—a man who has an intransigent mind and an unlimited ambition, and is in love with his own life . . . the kind of man who is what we were when we started, you and I. You gave him up. I can’t.”

He closed his eyes for an instant, and the tightening movement of his mouth was a smile, a smile substituting for a moan of understanding, amusement and pain. He asked, his voice gravely gentle, “Do you think that you can still serve him—that kind of man—by running the railroad?”

“Yes.”

“All right, Dagny. I won’t try to stop you. So long as you still think that, nothing can stop you, or should. You will stop on the day when you’ll discover that your work has been placed in the service, not of that man’s life, but of his destruction.” (635)

A little later, she continues,

“If I can keep Taggart Transcontinental in existence, it’s the only benefit I want. What do I care if they make me pay ransoms? Let them have what they want. I’ll have the railroad.”

He smiled. “Do you think so? Do you think that their need of you is your protection? Do you think that you can give them what they want? No, you won’t quit until you see, of your own sight and judgment, what it is that they really want. You know, Dagny, we were taught that some things belong to God and others to Caesar. Perhaps their God would permit it. But the man you say we’re serving—he does not permit it. He permits no divided allegiance, no war between your mind and your body, no gulf between your values and your actions, no tributes to Caesar. He permits no Caesars.” (636)

At one level, Francisco is denying any inherent conflict between the demands of a man’s mind and of his body. These are not warring rulers between which man is doomed to unceasing strife. (Hank, in particular, is tormented by a struggle between serving rational standards in the material realm and the irrational standards of others in regard to spiritual values. This is most painfully evidenced in his attitude toward his relationship with Dagny.¹⁸ Obviously, he eventually learns the proper relationship.) More fundamentally, however, Francisco is observing that a man is beholden to no sovereigns other than reality. If a man wishes to exist—if he seeks

to achieve his own happiness—then he must respect the demands imposed by the nature of reality. He must respect the fact that A is A—in his beliefs, in his desires, in his actions. That is the price that his life demands. Because reality is not a part-time master, however, and because its sovereignty is shared with no competing masters, the causal conditions necessary for a man's own happiness are his only God. Reality allows no deference to rivals. To the extent that a man pays tributes to any alternative sovereign, he defies the requirements of his own happiness.

The claim that *Atlas'* evil characters function on the premise of death may initially seem overly dark, I think, because it *is* a difficult fact to accept, as Akston remarks to Dagny (807, cited above). To appreciate the truth of this and its significance for the plot, we need to understand more precisely what the death premise is and how it is manifested in various characters.

Essentially, acceptance of the death premise means that a person does not value his life. The alternative between A and not-A, when the A in question is life, is the alternative between life and death. To the extent that a person's actions are not animated by the ambition of advancing his life, therefore, they, and he, are anti-life.

Just as embracing one's life is not simply an attitude experienced on a single occasion, accepting the death premise is not necessarily a conscious declaration made in a single moment. People on the death premise need not explicitly resolve: "I hate life. I pledge to hinder life wherever I can." Their governing premise is manifested, rather, in the way they spend their days. More specifically, it consists of their spurning (and often actively opposing) the pursuit of objective values.

Individuals on the premise of life are fundamentally thinkers and valuers. They acknowledge that human survival depends on the exercise of reason. And they accept the correlative responsibility of using their rationality as their means of acquiring knowledge, embracing ends, and achieving values. We observe this throughout *Atlas* in the heroes' basic orientation. All of the admirable characters, from Dagny and Galt through Eddie Willers and Gwen Ives, repeatedly respond to problems with logical thought and practical follow-through. They take command—of their minds and of their actions.

Those on the premise of death, by contrast, are, at their least destructive, passive. They do not exercise their rational faculties. Rather than focus and think in order to achieve any ends, they characteristically "summon the fog" (as Rand puts it in a description of Jim Taggart, 868). They evade, they shirk, they count on others to fulfill their needs and satisfy their desires. Jim, for instance, expects Dagny to make the railroad run and Cheryl—or *someone*—to shower unearned love on him (and, he hopes, in defiance of causality, to gain worth thereby). The tunnel catastrophe is the logical combustion of numerous individuals' cumulative evasions.¹⁹

James Taggart

Late in the story, when a beggar is blasé about receiving Jim's hundred-dollar offering, Jim is disturbed by dimly recognizing that the beggar's indifference to values mirrors his own (864). Whatever Jim's social position or job title or money might be, that breathing driftwood embodies Jim's basic character. We also come to know far more vicious depths of Jim's devotion to the death premise, however. He belligerently evinces positive hatred of objective values as such and of those who achieve them.²⁰ From childhood, Jim is jealous, resentful, and disparaging of Francisco and Dagny. He rides on their coattails while ridiculing their accomplishments as not truly impressive or as only so much good luck. His attitude toward men

of ability is naked in the animus he spews toward Hank, in a conversation with Lillian: “‘I’d like to see him beaten,’ he said. ‘I’d like to hear him scream with pain, just once’” (899).

After perfunctory sex with Betty Pope (emblematic of the utter void of values in both their lives), their gloomy next morning of lethargic, irritable sniping and indignation at life in general brightens when he turns his attention to “putting the skids” under his sister at a board meeting later that day (71).²¹ Jim and Betty bond over their resentment of Dagny’s success and Jim’s plans to “put her in her place” (71). Only the prospect of a producer’s downfall rekindles some semblance of desire in this pair. “Maybe I *will* take you out tonight,” Jim chirps to Betty, after contemplating his trap for Dagny (72).²²

In a telling conversation with Cheryl, Jim confesses his attitude toward all achievers: “Whatever they do, I can undo it. Let them build a track—I can come and break it, just like that!” He snapped his fingers. “Just like breaking a spine!” (879). When Cheryl suggests the significance of this statement, Jim retreats, in the manner typical of the evader:

“You want to break spines?” she whispered, trembling.

“I haven’t said that!” he screamed. “What’s the matter with you? I haven’t said it!” (879)

Jim’s response presumes that if he refuses to acknowledge his nature, it won’t be what it is.

Lillian Rearden

Lillian reflects another variation of the death premise. She does not seem as directly committed as Jim does to destruction as such, but is more intent on deriving a certain sense of superiority over Hank, in particular. She acts, Hank gradually understands, as if she believes that puncturing his strength will somehow bestow value on her (974–75). She seeks to destroy him precisely for his virtues, “as the symbol of man’s living power” (974).

Notice, for example, that after discovering that Hank is having an affair, Lillian does not acknowledge what that means about her place in his life. She does not mourn the erosion of their marriage as one would, if it were a genuine value. Rather, she is gleeful at what she regards as the “collapse” of his “vaunted sense of honor” and she relishes the prospect of his being condemned to the life of a “hypocrite.” By remaining his wife, Lillian hopes to stand as a relentless reminder of his “depravity” (429–31).²³

In response to Jim’s saying that he would like to see Hank broken (noted above), Lillian muses: “I can’t build his mills—but I can destroy them. I can’t produce his Metal—but I can take it away from him. I can’t bring men down to their knees in admiration—but I can bring them down to their knees” (899). When Lillian and Jim proceed to have sex (another pair of well-matched bedfellows), their mutual motive is hatred of the good (900). Their intention is to degrade Hank’s character (deluding themselves that they hold the power to do that). Similarly, when Lillian tells Dagny that it was she who had revealed Hank’s affair to the bureaucrats who then used it to extort his signature on the “Gift Certificate,” Dagny detects a hint of pleasure in Lillian’s admission. It was *she* who took Rearden Metal away from him, Lillian boasts (849). Perversely, if not pathetically, she implies that this is something to be proud of. Lillian continues, in the conversation with Dagny:

You can’t fight me. You can’t buy your way out of it, with those dollars which you’re able to make and I’m not. There’s no profit you can offer me—I’m devoid

of greed. I'm not paid by the bureaucrats for doing this—I am doing it without gain. Without gain. Do you understand me? (849)

The evil of her attitude—her attitude toward *all* values—is exactly what Dagny, Hank, and the reader do come to understand about Lillian. What Lillian chooses not to understand is what this boast reveals about herself. For to not seek values is to not seek life.

Robert Stadler

Rand recognizes that most people are not self-conscious haters of the good.²⁴ Other forms of evil can be just as virulent, however. Stadler, for instance, represents a still different facet of evil than Jim and Lillian do. Stadler is a paradigm of pragmatism. As such, he is an appeaser of evil who thereby eases the way for the more deliberately destructive to be effective.²⁵

On the surface, Stadler seems to champion a noble end: the progress of science. He tells himself that he must make concessions to opponents of reason (government bureaucrats, society's demands) in order to advance that end. Sacrifices are unavoidable (188–92, 1117–19). Yet over the course of the story, we see that his pragmatic compromises are not motivated by innocently misguided tactical judgments. Underneath, Stadler is a whim worshipper. As he pleads to Galt,

What I saw ahead, what I wanted, what I *felt*, was not to be measured in their miserable dollars! I wanted a laboratory! I needed it! What do I care where it came from or how? I could do so much! I could reach such heights! Don't you have any pity? I *wanted* it! (1118)

Stadler's attitude is: he wants what he wants; getting it is all that matters. To do so, he tunes out the longer-term repercussions of the means he adopts and the preconditions for the results to be objectively valuable. He offers numerous rationalizations for his compromises, groping to persuade himself that one *must* use deceit and force, that “men are not open to truth or reason” (191), that he “had no choice” and “there is no way to live except on their terms” (1118). Stadler is, in principle, no different from any whim worshipper who elevates his desires above the facts of reality. His crime is in certain respects worse than Jim's, however, because Stadler had the mind to know better. Through the pragmatic course he adopts, his prodigious intellect is directed not to the creation of valuable knowledge, but to the State Science Institute's thwarting Rearden Metal and to Project X, an exercise of annihilation for its own sake (816 ff.). By the end, Stadler can no longer evade the life-destroying essence of his pragmatism when, in his extended confession *cum* apologia to Galt, he finds himself declaring: “You are the man who has to be destroyed” (1119). The either-or alternative between the path of reason and life and the path of irrationality and death is inescapable.

While aspects of both Lillian and Stadler certainly reflect hatred of the good as such, Jim is most fully and brazenly committed to this. Lillian, in however warped a way, believes that she gains some value out of standing in a certain relationship to a man such as Hank. Stadler kids himself that the noble end of science justifies his corrosive means. Jim, however, seeks destruction as such. His campaign against values is much more total and unreserved than the others'. This is evident in his relationship with Cherryl, whom he repeatedly sets up to suffer failure and humiliation. Jim relishes his scheme to exterminate her ambition and to crush her

earnest efforts to become the best person she can be (874). When she finally enjoys a successful social evening, he scolds her for embarrassing him (875).

In Jim, Cherryl confronts “evil for evil’s sake” and the chilling realization that he is “a killer . . . for the sake of killing” (901, 904). His bloodthirsty character is even more plain when, during the torture of Galt, he is not satisfied with anything short of Galt’s death. Consider his exchange with Ferris:

“Jim, hasn’t he had enough? Don’t forget, we have to be careful.”

“No! He hasn’t had enough! He hasn’t even screamed yet!”

“Jim!” cried Mouch suddenly, terrified by something in Taggart’s face.

“We can’t afford to kill him! You know it!”

“I don’t care! I want to break him! I want to hear him scream! I want—”

And then it was Taggart who screamed. It was a long, sudden, piercing scream, as if at some sudden sight, though his eyes were staring at space and seemed blankly sightless. The sight he was confronting was within him. The protective walls of emotion, of evasion, of pretense, of semi-thinking and pseudo-words, built up by him through all of his years, had crashed in the span of one moment—the moment when he knew that he wanted Galt to die, knowing fully that his own death would follow. (1144–45)

The horrific truth that Jim faces is that he had sought destruction for its own sake. His motive was “the lust to destroy whatever was living, for the sake of whatever was not” (1145).²⁶

This is the death premise.

Given what the good is and does, hatred of the good is hatred of life. The paths of *Atlas*’ villains help us to understand Galt’s analysis of those on the premise of death:

They do not want to own your fortune, they want you to lose it; they do not want to succeed, they want you to fail; they do not want to live, they want you to die; they desire nothing, they hate existence, and they keep running, each trying not to learn that the object of his hatred is himself. (1046)²⁷

The worship of death is by far the most difficult thing that Hank and Dagny need to understand about their enemy before they can free themselves of evil’s clutches. After a steady accumulation of hints and insights, however, both of them finally recognize the ugly truth. In a final conversation with his family when they are panicked by Hank’s cutting off their allowance checks and they attempt fresh psychological tactics to win his renewed support, he realizes that his mother’s desperate plea, “we want to live,” is not true.

“Why, no—” he started in quiet astonishment and ended in quiet horror, as the thought struck him fully, “I don’t think you do. If you did, you would have known how to value me.” (973)

To have heaped only mocking ridicule and “hammering derision” (975) on that which keeps them alive—Hank’s work and achievements—reveals a damning picture of their regard for their lives. They do not know how to treat a value because they do not know what a *value* is. Why did they never bother to find out? Because they do not value their lives.

Dagny has a similar solemn epiphany when, in explaining to Jim and Cuffy Meigs the inevitably disastrous results that would come of their proposed course for the railroad, it dawns

on her that both of them already know everything she could tell them about its futility. It simply does not matter to them (842). She realizes, more broadly, that “inanimate indifference was the permanent state of the people around her” (1111). Other encounters with the looters, under increasingly dire conditions, prompt the recurrent wonder about this seemingly alien species, “*did* they want to live?” (1109, 1111).

The Impotence of Evil

While recognition of their enemies’ embrace of the death premise is critical to Hank’s and Dagny’s ultimate refusal to cooperate any longer, a second and closely related fact they must grasp is the impotence of evil and, correlatively, its utter dependence on the good. Given the essential nature of evil—“the irrational, the blind, the anti-real”—it contributes nothing to the furtherance of human life (1048). Those who seek to live have nothing to gain from evasion, irrationality, or any of its progeny. As Galt observes, a man has “no benefits to seek from human vices” (1023).

The demands that evil imposes on the good are not merely neutral or benign, however. They are poison. A man stands only to lose by any cooperation with evil. The “ransoms” that the heroes pay to buy off their adversaries do *no* good because they are paid in exchange for no positive value. Even the Wet Nurse eventually realizes this, evidenced in his explanation of his defending Rearden’s mill from the assault to seize control of it. When Rearden observes, in semi-astonished admiration, that the Wet Nurse had stuck his neck out, he responds:

But I had to! . . . I couldn’t help them wreck the mills, could I? . . . How long was I to keep from sticking my neck out? Till they broke yours? . . . And what would I do with my neck, if that’s how I had to keep it? (990)

The Wet Nurse has come to understand, in other words, that if living requires taking a great risk for the sake of his values, that is the price he will pay. For, after a long period of confused ambivalence, he has decided that *that* is what he wants: to live. And he gains nothing by taking any actions based on the antithetical code of death. (The contrast with Stadler is striking.)

Because evil is itself incapable of sustaining life, its endurance is entirely due to the support it receives from the good. The power of the irrational results from the power that the rational grant it. Early on, from his meeting with the official described as a “traffic cop,” Hank detects that his adversaries need something from him, although he is not yet sure what it is (364–67). Later, at Thanksgiving dinner, Hank realizes that the guilt that Lillian seeks to induce depends on his accepting her standards (464–65), and he has a similar realization in discussing with Dr. Ferris the blackmail based on his affair with Dagny (559–62, 564–65). Much later, when Jim cries his assurance to Hank that “you’ll do something” to maintain production even under suffocating restrictions (986–87), Hank more fully recognizes that he had made the looters’ exploitation possible. They wholly depend on us, he realizes; we have been feeding our own predators. (Notice that when Hank begins to pay less deference to his family’s wishes, refusing many of the demands that he had met in the past, even they have trouble any longer evading their abject dependence on him.) In another scene with Philip, Hank recognizes that Philip is asserting his weakness and lack of values as the source of his claim on him (927–32, especially 929–32; this is an instance of what Galt calls zero worship).

Francisco actually explains this dependence to Dagny, although she does not yet understand it. Francisco begins this exchange:

“It was our own guilt. We produced the wealth of the world—but we let our enemies write its moral code.”

“But we never accepted their code. We lived by our own standards.”

“Yes—and paid ransoms for it! Ransoms in matter and in spirit—in money, which our enemies received, but did not deserve, and in honor, which we deserved, but did not receive. *That* was our guilt—that we were willing to pay. We kept mankind alive, yet we allowed men to despise us and to worship our destroyers. We allowed them to worship incompetence and brutality, the recipients and the dispensers of the unearned. By accepting punishment, not for any sins, but for our virtues, we betrayed our code and made theirs possible.”
(619)

Eventually, Dagny comes to see the validity of Francisco’s charge that *she* acts as a destroyer, by sustaining the looters. She and Hank have both been unwittingly complicit in their own strangulation and in the assault on all that is good. What they finally appreciate is that, as Galt puts it, “evil [is] impotent . . . and . . . the only weapon of its triumph [is] the willingness of the good to serve it” (1048).

The Need to Withdraw

Crucial to Hank’s and Dagny’s acceptance of the need to abandon the looters’ society is their eventual recognition that there is no refuge from the alternative between life and death; no “in between” can be sustained. *Everything* is ruled by the law of excluded middle, including their own actions. They themselves, therefore, are either fundamentally for their happiness or against it; they support their lives or they support their deaths. “There’s no such thing as a temporary suicide,” as Hank observes (984). Dagny believes for a long time that concessions to her enemies will not damage her own values (evident in her readiness to pay ransoms as long as she can keep the railroad (636). Yet because of the inextinguishable, polar antagonism between life and death, any concession to evil is toxic to oneself.

Stadler is a chilling illustration of this. As a pragmatist, Stadler tries to skirt the fundamental alternative by circumscribing and compartmentalizing. He denounces Dagny and Galt as “impractical idealists” (790), implying that the ideal and the practical inhabit independent realms. People are the problem, he insists, implying that people supersede reality (818). Stadler pretends that he can somehow escape the either-or character of human existence—that he can survive without respecting the law of excluded middle, which means: without respecting the basic nature of reality, the fact that A is A. (The irony of his being the most respected mind in science is rich.) As a result of these evasions, we watch Stadler descend into ever greater depths of destruction, culminating in his call for the death of Galt. Yet in that scene, we also witness Stadler’s *self*-destruction. He begins the meeting with Galt by pleading his innocence (against his internal knowledge of his guilt) and ends in agony, moaning “No . . . No . . .” against “the full meaning of his own words” that call for Galt’s death (1117, 1119).

The sanction given by the good protects evil and obscures its utter dependence on the good. The cushion afforded by these “death buffers” makes it more difficult to grasp that the alternative *is* one or the other.²⁸ But it is recognition of the mutually exclusive and jointly

exhaustive alternative between the standard of life and the standard of death that enables the heroes to eventually see who their allies and enemies are and the actual path necessary for their happiness. When Francisco first tells Dagny that she is the enemy whom he must defeat, rather than Jim or Mouch, she is disbelieving (636). Much later, in the gulch, Galt similarly observes that her course is that of his enemy (961). It is only when she and Hank understand the truth of this—that they have been aiding Galt’s enemies and that to have been fighting against the “quitters” is to have been fighting against themselves—that they accept the imperative to strike.

As we noted earlier, while Hank and Dagny try to coexist with the looters, they do so on a mistaken premise. For as long as they believe that ransoms are their only means of achieving their values, it is their integrity in devotion to those values that leads them to continue that course. Eventual recognition of their opponents’ death premise and of the complete dependence of evil on *their* support shows them the propriety of withdrawing that support. Contrary to Dagny’s initial assumption, abandoning the looters’ world is not “giving up.” It is, rather, testament to her love of her life—as is captured in the requisite oath for entry into Galt’s gulch: “I swear by my life and my love of it that I will never live for the sake of another man nor ask another man to live for mine” (731). And it reflects knowledge and acceptance of the necessary conditions of life. A man cannot live on the premise of death. It is when Hank and Dagny recognize *this*, in the end, alongside their adversaries’ allegiance to death and the utter impotence of evil, that they join those who have seen it before them.²⁹

KNOWLEDGE OF THE “EITHER-OR” IN ACTION

Hank’s and Dagny’s growing understanding of the nature of their enemies clearly informs their actions. Indeed, a reader can only fully understand the novel if we grasp, as they do, the do-or-die opposition between good and evil. Without that, certain features of the story may seem unjustified. Let us examine next, then, how a proper understanding of the nature of good and evil illuminates what might otherwise be troubling aspects of the novel.

Consider, first, some of the book’s terminology. “Destroyers” may initially seem too harsh a term to characterize either those who are recruiting producers to quit or those of Jim’s ilk. To call them “destroyers” seems disproportionate to the actual disagreements between the opposing camps. Yet in fact, this term is exactly right, for it names the essence of what evil or irrationality does: it thwarts life. Destruction is destruction, regardless of the degree to which it is deliberate.

“Looters,” similarly, may seem an ill-fitting epithet for the good guys’ adversaries. These people are not breaking into stores and running away with merchandise, after all. Yet it is entirely apt, in truth, because this *is* their essential character. Given that those who are irrational create no values and thus have nothing to trade in their interactions with others, they rely completely on what others produce. Notice that in Mr. Thompson’s most urgent, final attempt to persuade Galt to cooperate, for instance, all he can offer is the threat to use force (1102). In the qualities and values that human life depends upon, however, Thompson is penniless, as Galt points out to him (1102).³⁰

We may have a little more difficulty accepting Galt’s calling Dagny his “enemy” (961), responsible for the dangerous condition of the world for him. What this unsparing characterization reflects, however, is the fact that evil, on its own, *is* impotent. Whatever efficacy it enjoys is a result of the power that the good provides it by cooperating with its standards. Dagny’s well-meaning intentions are not enough. Causality dictates proper action, not wishes,

however innocent. And a person who is truly on the strikers' side will not make things any easier for those who would thwart them. Individuals who sanction evil in any form or degree are the enablers of evil, and thereby make themselves the enemies of the good.

When we turn from language to characters' actions, the principal choice that reflects the heroes' recognition of the either-or nature of their alternative is the decision to go on strike. There is no minimizing how profound an action that is. Galt, in launching the strike, is abandoning his motor and the joy of bringing its transformative potential to full fruition. *All* the strikers are leaving life as they have known it. They are giving up the specific values that they have been passionately devoted to (most significantly, their work). For Francisco, striking entails hurting the woman he cherishes. He must allow Dagny to think him a worthless playboy and must make her life harder by recruiting other producers, steadily draining material and spiritual nourishment away from her. Needless to say, it also pains him to abandon their relationship and to watch her struggle as she does.

By refusing to any longer cooperate with those who would destroy them, the strikers are leaving behind many decent people, such as Eddie Willers and Gwen Ives.³¹ They are not indifferent to this. The heroes' regard for other rational men is palpable in several episodes. Hank's compassionate treatment of the Wet Nurse, well before he shows anything near to Eddie's or Gwen's moral stature, is indicative of Hank's genuine concern for anyone who does value life. Hank had detected certain promising traits in the Wet Nurse, an assessment later vindicated by his heroic performance fighting the assault on the mills. Similarly, Dagny's generosity toward Cheryl and the tramp testify to her respect for those on the premise of life. This sincere benevolence notwithstanding, the strikers recognize that they are not responsible for the welfare of others. The idea that they should risk their lives for others' need reflects the code of irrationality that they are rejecting. The strikers are compelled to desert the looters' world, knowing that some good people will suffer heavier burdens as a result, because no compromise between life and death is sustainable. If a man chooses to live, he must accept that his options are one or the other. "Life—and a little death" is not a viable prescription.

Once one understands why the strike makes sense, it is easier to dissolve any nagging misgivings about some of the other actions of the heroes. Hank's peremptory divorce of Lillian against her will, for instance, with "no alimony and no property settlement" (571), reflects his final recognition that after her treatment of him over their years together, he owes her nothing. Any obligation he incurred from marrying her has been long since discharged. She has offered no genuine value to him and she offers none now; indeed, she actively seeks to destroy him. Therefore, he has no reason to continue to support her in any way. Or consider Galt's refusal of Francisco's request to have Dagny spend her last week in the valley at his place (796). Acquiescing would have betrayed how Galt feels about Dagny. The truth is, *he* wants her. To have made such a sacrifice for Francisco would have faked the value that she is to him. Sacrifices fake the value that different things are, for a person, and they fake the nature of value itself. Any sacrifice of a man's values hurts *him*.³²

Two of the heroes' other choices might seem more disturbing. When Dagny is "captive" in the gulch, missing and feared killed by those outside, Galt does not allow her to notify Rearden that she is all right.³³ This might seem cruel, since the reader knows that Hank and Dagny are actually good guys. Once one understands the strict opposition between good and evil, however, the reasoning for this policy is not difficult to see. Anyone who is not a committed resident of the valley is an enemy, whether by design or by accident. This includes scabs and prospective members, such as Dagny and Hank. To the extent that they are still cooperating with

the destroyers, they are making life harder for the strikers. Consequently, the strikers must give them no quarter. To lighten *their* load in any way would add to the strikers' own and endanger their safety. Bear in mind that there is nothing that the looters won't do in order to obtain Galt's cooperation. This is plain as we see them, increasingly desperate, resort to guns and torture.³⁴ Since the good guys who are still on the outside are unwittingly assisting their destroyers (and the destroyers of all who embrace the premise of life), any knowledge that these people possess of the gulch makes them dangerous, insofar as they might divulge its existence (inadvertently or under coercion) and thereby jeopardize its residents' security. In short, any cooperation with the world of the looters is a threat to all the strikers. And for that reason, the strikers cannot permit it. Hank's "need" for information about Dagny's welfare does not obligate the strikers to provide that information, particularly given that his course of action continues to oppose them.³⁵

Finally, consider Dagny's shooting the guard during the rescue of Galt (1147-48). Does she really have to *kill* him?

The fundamental incompatibility between the code of life and the code of death makes the answer clear. The guard sees his choice as between obeying Ferris' orders or Dagny's. When he whines that he doesn't know what to do—how can *he* decide?—she matter-of-factly responds: "It's your life." This, Rand has shown, is what is at stake for each of us, in every decision. The guard tries to escape the fundamental alternative and his need to choose between the two, seeking to wiggle out to some enclave in between. But a man cannot escape that choice. The only alternative to life is destruction, as the guard's death makes graphic.

By defending Galt's imprisonment, the guard is defending the collectivist, altruist, irrational principles that have been eating Dagny alive. Dagny aims at his heart because *she* chooses life. Having done so—and with knowledge, now, of life's nonnegotiable conditions and of the nature of the enemy—she will take no chances by prolonging any threat to it. It's his life or hers, she realizes (and, of course, his life or Galt's). On behalf of their love of their lives, the heroes must kill that which is killing them.

The concern that any of the actions I have just analyzed is cruel or unduly harsh, we should recognize, reveals the lingering belief that a person *can* straddle incompatible standards, serving the mutually contradictory ends of one's life and one's death without cost. Galt observes as much about Dagny's decision of whether to leave the gulch: "If it seems hard, it's because you still think it does not have to be one or the other. You will learn that it does" (749). This is precisely what all those who eventually join the strike do learn.

Man cannot fudge the law of identity and the law of excluded middle. Life or death is either-or. The pursuit of one's life must be, correspondingly, uncompromising. Remember that the heroes come to realize that their opponents stand on the premise of death. Jim, Lillian, and Stadler are not misguided allies of theirs who are after the same thing. If they were, the heroes might reasonably think, "oh, they'll come around, eventually; they will appreciate that ours is the better way." The ugly fact is that the looters do not seek what the producers do. Accordingly, all that the looters are doing and can be expected to do in the future is obstruct the producers' lives. The only thing for those who love their lives to do, consequently, is to withdraw the sustenance they have provided to their destroyers and renounce the burdens they have borne on their enemies' behalf. The heroes' deliverance depends on their total rejection of all irrational standards. Their full commitment to their own happiness depends on their recognition that anything less than that is suicide.

MORAL ABSOLUTISM

Ayn Rand's moral philosophy is absolutist. The authority of moral principles is unequivocal. When a moral principle properly applies, it may not be violated. "There are two sides to every issue," Galt observes, "one side is right and the other is wrong, but the middle is always evil" (1054). Absolutism does not mean that all moral answers are easy to reach, but that there is a definite fact of the matter as to something's ultimate value and the proper course of action. The complexity of certain cases is not a license to pretend otherwise. A man's adherence to rational moral principles, correspondingly, must be uncompromising. "In the realm of morality nothing less than perfection will do" (1059).³⁶

"Absolutism" is sometimes used slightly differently, to refer to the wide breadth of a moral code that governs all (or nearly all) of the kinds of choices that a man encounters. Such a code is absolute in being all-encompassing, allowing no "time-outs" from morality's demands. While the scope of morality's authority is strictly distinct from the relative rigor or laxness of any of its individual principles (that is, the question of whether or not it is ever permissible to violate a particular moral principle is independent of the number of issues that are governed by moral principles), these two senses of absolutism both stem from the same source, as we shall see. In what follows, I will use "absolutism" in the first sense, to refer to the fact that moral principles permit no violations. It will be apparent, however, that both senses of absolutism are often involved.

Interestingly, the absolutism of Rand's moral philosophy is the source of much hostility toward it. It is not only the substance of her moral theory—its unorthodox advocacy of egoism—that many people find objectionable, but the "extreme," unqualified character of that code. Skepticism toward absolutism is understandable, since its assertion is usually arbitrary (as with religious dogma). Moreover, given that the reigning moral doctrine of altruism requires violations (since no one could survive if he consistently obeyed a code of self-sacrifice), most people subconsciously conclude that any demand for perfect adherence is utterly impractical. This breeds a lack of seriousness about moral standards, as such.³⁷ While moral absolutism is too large a subject to explore in any detail here, it is useful to see that its foundation lies in the mutually exclusive alternative between good and evil that we have been examining. Before concluding, then, let me briefly indicate this basis for it.

Rand shows that the evil is anti-life. Whatever its particular manifestation or degree, whatever its motivation or an agent's awareness of its impact on a given occasion, that which is evil works to impede human life. Because the good is that which advances human life and because every choice that a man makes stands to either nourish or poison his life, the either-or between good and evil is both inescapable and of profound consequence. This either-or character of a man's choices thus dictates absolutism in regard to both morality's comprehensive scope and its "100%-ism," its refusal to permit compromise. A man cannot serve his life by pretending that morality's domain is more circumscribed than it is, just as a man cannot serve his life by pretending that violations of rational principles will be beneficial to him. Galt indicates the basic reason for this:

In any compromise between food and poison, it is only death that can win. In any compromise between good and evil, it is only evil that can profit. In that transfusion of blood which drains the good to feed the evil, the compromiser is the transmitting rubber tube. (1054)³⁸

The advancement of life, as we have seen throughout, has nothing to gain from that which damages life.

Notice that as long as the destructive nature of evil is murky to a person, he may understandably be lax about avoiding it. If morality is a game, then goodness is a game and the propriety of individual choices seems of no real consequence. A person must clearly grasp the stakes of moral principles in order to see the price of deviating from them. By making these stakes and the fundamental incompatibility of good and evil plain, Rand demonstrates that to compromise on a valid moral principle is to damage oneself. Such an action's premise is, in effect: "I'm not really committed to my happiness," or "I want to live—sort of, kinda, but not fully." Because all of a man's choices do carry consequences for his existence, however, the man who seeks to live cannot afford to drift between life-advancing and life-diminishing actions. Rather, he must identify each specific option that he contemplates as essentially a "death action" or a "life action," vigilantly restricting himself to the latter. It is the mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive nature of the alternative between life and death and, correspondingly, between good and evil, in other words, that dictates the absolutism of morality.

Just as *Atlas* shows that a man should lend no support to the evil of others, the point of moral absolutism is that he should tolerate no evil in himself. Such concessions to the irrational are equally self-destructive. Given that a man's fundamental alternative is between life and death, he can do himself no *good* by cheating on rational, life-fostering principles. Existence permits no tributes to competing Caesars.

In the end, moral "shoulds" are unyielding because reality is unyielding. Everything is governed by the law of excluded middle, including the effects of a man's actions. A moral code that is intended to serve human life must respect the conditions of life. And so must any person who seeks his life.

CONCLUSION

In the opening chapter of *Atlas Shrugged*, Eddie recalls a childhood conversation in which he and Dagny affirmed a devotion to "the best within us," even while he was uncertain of exactly what that was. It was not "business or earning a living," he thought at the time, but it consisted in "things like winning battles, or saving people out of fires, or climbing mountains." It seemed a matter of doing "whatever is right" (6).

In the book's final chapter, Eddie identifies this quality more accurately. What is right *is* "business and earning a living and that in man which makes it possible—that is the best within us, *that* was the thing to defend" (1166).

The best within us is that which wants to live—wholeheartedly, unequivocally, and with full understanding of what human life demands. *Atlas* illustrates that this love of one's life incorporates knowledge as well as desire. Love of life is not simply an ardent wish for one's happiness, the grip of an emotion or a mood. It is a deliberate, informed commitment. The quality within us that makes all values possible depends on knowledge of the causal requirements of one's happiness as well as the commitment to achieving one's happiness, in light of that knowledge. To love one's life—to withdraw all sanction of evil, to refuse tributes to false gods, to swear the oath—requires the complete repudiation of anything and everything that impedes life. As symbolized in Dagny's shooting of the guard, it requires the denial of all quarter to poisonous premises and practices.

The alternative between good and evil, Rand demonstrates in *Atlas*, is, fundamentally, the alternative between one's life and one's death. Coming to appreciate that no neutral territory is available, that one can take no action that does not support one or the other and that concessions to irrational standards achieve no value but bring only some form and degree of self-destruction, is what enables the heroes ultimately to recognize the imperative to strike. It is their understanding of the inescapable and mutually exclusive nature of the choice between life and death—and of how the choice between the rational and the irrational and between good and evil reflects this—that allows them to fully love their lives *in action*. It liberates them to pursue, without apology, the joy of their existence. And it allows them to experience that joy.³⁹

NOTES

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1. Rand remarks on the theme in *The Art of Fiction*, Tore Boeckmann, ed. (New York: Plume, 2000), 17–18.
 2. Extensive explanation can be found in Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet, 1964); Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1991), chapter 7; and Tara Smith, *Viable Values: A Study of Life as the Root and Reward of Morality* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), chapters 4 and 5.
 3. By “reason,” Rand means “the faculty that perceives, identifies and integrates the material provided by [man’s] senses,” *Atlas*, 1016. For more on the nature of reason, see Peikoff, *Objectivism*, 152–53, 159–63, 220, and on reason as man’s primary virtue, 220–29. On the latter, also see Tara Smith, *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics—The Virtuous Egoist* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 48–74.
 4. Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 13, emphasis in original.
 5. Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” 16.
 6. “Life” is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “the series of actions and occurrences constituting the history of an individual (especially a human being) from birth to death.” 1971 edition. Also see definitions in the online edition, which include: “The property which constitutes the essential difference between a living animal or plant, or a living portion of organic tissue, and dead or non-living matter; the assemblage of the functional activities by which the presence of this property is manifested. . . ; Continuance or prolongation of animate existence; opposed to *death*.” Online edition. Also see Natalie Angier, *The Canon—A Whirligig Tour of the Beautiful Basics of Science* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 172–73, and Harry Binswanger, *The Biological Basis of Teleological Concepts* (Marina del Rey, Calif.: Ayn Rand Institute Press, 1990), 6–7, 63–64.
 7. Particulars can also vary within a species, within boundaries that are set by the nature of that species. For discussion of this, see Smith, *Viable Values*, 99–101, 127–28, 183 and *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics*, 27, 30.
 8. For thorough explanation of this, see Rand, “Causality vs. Duty,” *Philosophy: Who Needs It* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1982), 118–119; Rand, “Objectivist Ethics,” 17–18; Peikoff, *Objectivism*, 241–48; Smith, *Viable Values*, 84–90, 93–95, 101–3; *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics*, 21–23.
 9. Rand, “Objectivist Ethics,” 25. Also see 25–27 and *Atlas*, 1014.
 10. For much more on the intimate relationship between existence and flourishing, see Rand, “Objectivist Ethics,” 25–27, and Smith, *Viable Values*, 125–51.
 11. Notice that this is the familiar yardstick by which we assess well-being and distinguish health from disease or deficiency in all organisms. Moreover, in the realm of ethics, many philosophers have sought to explain that which is good for human beings as rooted in the needs of a man’s nature (pithily expressed in Peter Geach’s claim that “men need virtues as bees need stings”). See Peter Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 17; Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001); Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Berys Gaut, “The Structure of Practical Reason,” in Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut, eds., *Ethics and Practical Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); James D. Wallace, *Virtues and Vices* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press), 1978; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.
- For more on the difference between objective, subjective, and intrinsic value, see Smith, “The Importance of the Subject in Objective Morality: Distinguishing Objective from Intrinsic Value,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 25, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 126–48; Smith, “‘Social’ Objectivity and the Objectivity of Value,” in *Science, Values, and Objectivity*, Peter Machamer and Gereon Walters, eds., *Science, Values, and Objectivity* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), 143–71; Darryl Wright, “Evaluative Concepts and Objective Values: Rand on Moral Objectivity,” *Social Philosophy and Policy*

25, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 149–81; and Wright, “Evaluative Concepts and Objective Value,” paper delivered at Conference on Concepts and Objectivity, University of Pittsburgh, Sept. 22–24, 2006.

12. This formulation is borrowed from Wright.

13. Thanks to Greg Salmieri for conversation that led me to appreciate this point more keenly.

14. Rand, “For the New Intellectual,” *For the New Intellectual* (New York: Random House, 1961), 10.

15. Similarly, in an earlier scene, she tells Danagger that she is not ready to surrender the world to the looters, 445.

16. See Rand, “Objectivist Ethics,” 25. Insofar as evil is a moral concept, it refers to that which *deliberately* works to oppose human life. It is intentional human action and its products that can be evil, not accident or natural processes beyond man’s control.

17. For discussion of the death premise, see Rand, “The Age of Envy,” *Return of the Primitive: The Anti-Industrial Revolution*, Peter Schwartz, ed. (New York: Meridian, 1999), 130–58.

18. See his self-denunciation after their first night together, 254–55.

19. For excellent discussion of the death premise and the life premise, see Onkar Ghate, “The Death Premise in *We the Living* and *Atlas Shrugged*,” in Robert Mayhew, ed., *Essays on Ayn Rand’s We the Living* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2004), 335–56.

20. He exemplifies hatred of the good for being the good, which Rand identifies as the lowest rung of evil in “The Age of Envy.”

21. Before that, Jim “did not feel like moving to find his watch . . . it was too much trouble to look for his slippers,” and Betty had resentfully declared: “I hate morning. Here’s another day and nothing to do” (70).

22. Ghate offers this vivid example, “Death Premise,” 344.

23. The punishment she seeks to impose is a graphic indictment of *her* character (see 431).

24. Rand, “The Age of Envy,” 149. Also note her remark that “deliberately evil men are a very small minority,” “Altruism as Appeasement,” *The Objectivist* 5, January 1966, 6.

25. See his exchange with Dagny, 188–89.

26. I recommend reading the fuller account of what Jim realizes about himself, on 1145.

27. Eric Starnes’ suicide on the wedding day of the girl he pines for (an act carried out in her bedroom, so as to be discovered by the newlyweds that night) is another grotesque illustration of this, 321. Thanks to Jason Rheins for reminding me of this example. Also see Rand, “The Age of Envy,” 133–34.

28. Galt refers to such “buffers” on 1047.

29. Peikoff provides an illuminating explanation of how the virtue of integrity, in Rand’s view, demands *seeing* one’s alternatives accurately, more than strength of doing in the familiar idea of willpower, *Objectivism*, 261–62. This is clearly on display in *Atlas*, as we witness Hank’s and Dagny’s coming to see the true nature of their enemy and their unwitting role in their own destruction. (See Gregory Salmieri, “Discovering Atlantis: *Atlas Shrugged*’s Demonstration of a New Moral Philosophy,” in the present volume.)

30. Hank offers a similar rejoinder to Ferris’ suggestion that Hank would have been better off had he taken the chance to join Ferris’ side early on: “But if I had joined you . . . what would I have found worth looting from Orren Boyle?” (560).

Separately, while people who do not create material values certainly sometimes receive goods voluntarily from others, this is not what is dominantly on display in *Atlas*. The heroes’ adversaries are looters insofar as they claim that which they neither deserve nor have rights to.

31. The fate of Gwen Ives is actually left unstated, in the novel, but since we have no report that she reaches the gulch, it seems fair to refer to her alongside Eddie, here.

32. A sacrifice is the surrender of a greater value for a lesser value. It is not to be confused with an investment, in which a person forgoes a smaller value for the sake of gaining a greater value later. See Rand, “The Ethics of Emergencies,” *Virtue of Selfishness*, 50–53; Peikoff, *Objectivism*, 232–36; Smith, *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics*, 38–40.

33. After explaining that residents in the Gulch are permitted no communication with those in the outside world, Galt does ask whether Dagny wishes to request a special exception. It is not entirely clear that he would grant it, however, if she were to make such a request, 763–64.

34. Reliance on force is the natural culmination of a code of irrationality. Once one abandons reason, force is the only fundamental alternative. See Rand, “Faith and Force,” *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, 70–92.

35. Also bear in mind the logic of this decision from the perspective of the plot. At this stage in the story, Dagny has found a love greater than her love for Hank. Given this, placing Hank’s well-being above Galt’s would risk a greater value, Galt, for a lesser (albeit a tremendous) value, Hank. And we know by now that Dagny does not knowingly make sacrifices. (The choice of whether to contact Hank is not ultimately hers, of course, but this helps to explain why she doesn’t resist the policy and seek an exception.)

Later, by contrast, when Hank meets Galt and sends Dagny a note from the valley—“I have met him. I don’t blame you” (1002)—the very different context justifies this breach of the barrier against communication between the two realms. Dagny is already aware of the gulch and of the strike. Hank is thus not disclosing any new, potentially threatening information. When Dagny had been in the valley, however, Hank had no clue of its existence.

36. Bear in mind that Rand firmly distinguishes an innocent error from a moral failing, writing that “errors of knowledge are not breaches of morality,” and that “no proper moral code can demand infallibility or omniscience,” “The Cult of Moral Grayness,” *Virtue of Selfishness*, 88. It is also important to appreciate that the proper application of moral principles is contextual. See Peikoff, *Objectivism*, 274–76, and Smith, *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics*, 36, 94–105. On moral perfection, see Smith “Morality Without the Wink: A Defense of Moral Perfection,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 29 (2004): 315–31, and the discussion of pride in Smith, *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics*, chapter 9.

37. Consider Galt’s observation: “A moral code impossible to practice, a code that demands imperfection or death, has taught you to dissolve all ideas in fog, to permit no firm definitions, to regard any concept as approximate and any rule of conduct as elastic, to hedge on any principle, to compromise on any value, to take the middle of any road. By extorting your acceptance of supernatural absolutes, it has forced you to reject the absolute of nature” (1054).

38. For related discussion of the way in which the power of the good depends on its consistency, see Peikoff, *Objectivism*, 264–67.

39. Thanks for many valuable comments to participants in a workshop cosponsored by the Anthem Fellowship for the Study of Objectivism at the University of Texas at Austin and the Ayn Rand Institute, held in Irvine, Calif., in January 2008: Tore Boeckmann, Yaron Brook, Onkar Ghate, Robert Mayhew, Jason Rheins, and Greg Salmieri, and to Debi Ghate, for co-organizing this workshop with me. Greg Salmieri’s lecture course “*Atlas Shrugged* as a Work of Philosophy,” given at OCON, Telluride, July 2007, was also very helpful for my thinking about these issues. Robert Mayhew’s editorial comments have improved the paper.