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Prometheus' Discovery: Individualism and the Meaning of the Concept "I" in *Anthem*

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The theme is the word "I." The whole story is built around one idea: what would happen if a man lost the concept "I," and how would he regain it? . . . It is a psychological issue that I have to dramatize only on the discoveries of that man—on how he recaptures the concept.

—Ayn Rand, 1969 nonfiction writing course¹

Anthem's theme is the meaning of the concept "I."² Ayn Rand dramatizes this meaning by showing what happens when the concept is expunged. By recounting the steps by which Prometheus re-forms the concept, Rand shows why it is needed. The facts that give rise to the need for the concept, and the implications of these facts, constitute the philosophy of individualism that Prometheus expounds in the novel's final two chapters.

In this essay I discuss the relationship between "I" and individualism, and I detail the steps by which Prometheus discovers both. My aim is to highlight the argument for individualism contained in the steps by which Prometheus reaches it. Throughout I draw heavily on Rand's theory of concepts. Rand would not develop this theory until the early 1940s,³ but elements of it are anticipated in her earlier thought, and the theory articulates the way she (and her characters) formed and used concepts throughout her career. Indeed, Rand developed the theory by asking herself: "What is it that my mind does when I use concepts? To what do I refer and how do I learn new concepts?" (*Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* [ITOE], 307).

INDIVIDUALISM AND THE CONCEPT “I”

In a 1936 letter, Ayn Rand wrote: “That one word—individualism—is to be the theme song, the goal, the only aim of all my writing.”⁴ It is certainly the theme song and aim of *Anthem*, but what precisely is it? In its most general sense, individualism is an emphasis on or endorsement of the individual as opposed to the collective. This attitude finds expression in a series of interconnected philosophical theses which are captured nicely by the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s (*OED*) three definitions of the term:

1. Self-centred feeling or conduct as a principle; a mode of life in which the individual pursues his own ends or follows out his own ideas; free and independent individual action or thought; egoism.
2. The social theory which advocates the free and independent action of the individual, as opposed to communistic methods of organization and state interference. Opposed to Communism and Socialism.
3. In metaphysics the doctrine that the individual is a self-determined whole, and that any larger whole is merely an aggregate of individuals, which, if they act upon each other at all do so only externally.⁵

The doctrines specified in these definitions stand in a certain logical relationship. The first definition presents an ethical theory (henceforth “egoism”) advocating the principle of selfish action. Following the *OED*’s entry on egoism, we can elaborate this principle as follows: “Self-interest is the foundation of morality” such that one should hold “one’s own interest as the supreme guiding principle of [one’s] action.” Egoism presupposes the doctrine espoused in the third definition of individualism, which we can call “metaphysical individualism.”⁶ “Independent individual action or thought” cannot be proper unless it is possible, and it is not possible if men are mere fragments of some larger social organism. Only if each man is a metaphysically distinct, self-determining creature can he have ideas, ends, or interests *of his own* to act on. If metaphysical individualism is a premise for egoism, then the doctrine described in the remaining definition is a consequence of it. We can call this doctrine “political individualism.” If each man ought to pursue his own ends on the basis of his own thinking, then the proper political system is the one that leaves him free to do so.

Individualism can thus be seen as egoism along with its metaphysical presuppositions and political implications. It is this

complex doctrine that Prometheus discovers over the course of *Anthem*. The climax of the progression is his rediscovery of the concept “I.” In order to understand why this is the crucial step, we need to consider the meaning of the concept.

We can begin by asking why we need the concept. Or, to put the question in the context of the novel: What exactly is it that Prometheus lacks before he learns the concept “I”? Certainly he is aware of himself as a distinct physical entity. He is aware that he is referring to only one man when he tells us that his name is Equality 7-2521, that this name is written on a bracelet around his left wrist, that he is twenty-one years old, six feet tall, and so on. In Prometheus’ first journal entry it is clear that he is also aware of himself as spiritually distinct from his “brothers.” He contrasts his moral character to theirs:

All men are good and wise. It is only we, Equality
7-2521, we alone who were born with a curse. For
we are not like our brothers. (20)⁷

Two years prior to writing this entry, Prometheus was even capable of asserting an individual claim to property:

This place is ours. This place belongs to us,
Equality 7-2521, and to no other men on earth. And
if we ever surrender it, we shall surrender our life
with it also. (34)

Prometheus self-consciously had distinctive preferences throughout his years in the Home of the Students. He preferred the Science of Things to his other studies, and likely already preferred International 4-8818 to his other classmates. So what exactly does Prometheus lack before rediscovering the concept “I”?

For the beginning of an answer, recall the awkward, wordy form that his language requires for the expression of individual judgments and preferences. Singular pronouns facilitate the isolation of one person from others in thought. Without them it is still possible to think of people individually, but not without special effort. This effort is most eloquently dramatized in Gaea’s profession of love:

“We are one . . . alone . . . and only . . . and we love
you who are one . . . alone . . . and only.” (87)

Each qualification of “we” and “you,” and the pauses between them, represent a distinct mental action that Gaea needs to perform to achieve the thought that we can fluently express with the words “I love you.”⁸

The first-person singular pronoun, “I,” allows a man effortlessly to maintain an awareness of himself in distinction from others. The grammatical policy of referring to oneself by this pronoun exclusively makes this view of oneself omnipresent in thought. But why is it necessary to maintain this perspective on oneself? Why does a man need a concept, denoted by a special word, to keep himself differentiated from others in his thoughts? A brief discussion of the general function of concepts will be useful in answering this question.

The difference between Gaea’s lengthy statement and “I love you” points to what Rand would later identify as the cognitive role of all concepts. They are devices for achieving what she called “unit economy.” In making even the most rudimentary decisions we need to deal with massive quantities of information. Yet we are only able to hold a small number of distinct items (or “units”) in mind at once. This gives rise to a need “to reduce a vast amount of information to a minimal number of units” (*ITOE*, 63). The need is fulfilled by concepts.⁹ Each concept is a single unit of thought, held in mind by means of a single word denoting it, but it represents a potentially vast body of knowledge.

To borrow one of Rand’s examples, consider the case of a juror who reminds himself of his responsibilities by thinking “I must be just.” The concept “justice” is a unitary grasp¹⁰ of a complex phenomenon: “the act of judging a man’s character and/or actions exclusively on the basis of all the factual evidence available, and of evaluating it by means of an objective moral criterion” (*ITOE*, 51). “If that concept did not exist,” Rand asks, “*what number* of considerations would a man have to bear in mind simultaneously, at every step of the process of judging another man?” (*ITOE*, 70).

The point of the example is not simply that the concept “justice” saves time, making the juror’s job less taxing. Rather, without the concept it would be *impossible* for the juror to do his job at all. In order to formulate his intention to be just, he would need to hold so many considerations in mind that he would have no mental space left to consider the evidence of the case. By condensing our knowledge into a manageable form, concepts enable us to take actions (e.g., judging) that would not otherwise be possible. They also make possible new knowledge (e.g., the verdict in the court case). This knowledge can, in turn, be condensed by further concepts which would not have been possible without the initial ones. For example, concepts like “verdict” and “mistrial” would not be possible without the concept “justice.”

The need for unit-economy thus gives rise to the need for concepts, and it mandates that we form concepts in specific cases where there is a wealth of data to be made available for use (in

thought and action) by conceptual condensation. But we do not need to form concepts for every sort of thing we can distinguish; we designate many things by descriptive phrases. To form concepts in most of these cases would be cognitively stultifying. Rand discusses the case of “beautiful blondes with blue eyes, 5’5” tall and 24 years old”:

If such a special concept [for these women] existed, it would lead to senseless duplication of cognitive effort (and to conceptual chaos): everything of significance discovered about the group would apply to all other young women as well. There would be no cognitive justification for such a concept. (*ITOE*, 71)

The promiscuous formation of concepts to denote such things as Rand’s blue-eyed blondes would frustrate our need for unit-economy by burdening us with extraneous considerations. The standards for when to form concepts are determined by “the requirements of cognition (and the principle of unit-economy)” (*ITOE*, 69), and on this basis, the mere fact that we *can* make a differentiation does not mean that a special concept is necessary or even permissible.

The concept “I” denotes an individual man from his own perspective.¹¹ The fact that we can take such a perspective on ourselves does not by itself establish that we need a special concept for this purpose. As I noted earlier, the concept “I” makes the distinction between self and others a constant motif of our mental lives.¹² Why is such a policy necessary? Why is the distinction between self and others *so* important that it must *always* be present in thought?

A man needs the concept “I” because “the mind is an attribute of the individual,”¹³ so that, if a man is to think at all, he must do it as “one . . . alone . . . and only.” Rand makes this point in terms of valuing in a 1935 journal entry:

How can there be valuing without those who value?
A verb does not exist in a vacuum. A verb presupposes a noun. There is no such thing as an action without the one who acts. And who can do the valuing except a man?

A collective valuing would amount to this: one believes what others believe, *because* others believe it. If we have ten people and each one of them chooses to believe only what the nine others believe—just exactly who establishes the belief, and how? . . . There has to be a cause of causes, a

determining factor, a basic initiative. If it is not taken by a man—by whom, then, is it taken? If a man is not the one to weigh, value and decide—who decides?¹⁴

Weighing, valuing, and deciding are not automatic. They require an effort on which men can default. Indeed Rand identifies the thing that is most “wrong with the world” as the absence of “the act and habit of valuing and selecting in one’s mental life.”¹⁵ Consider the process by which Prometheus discovers the “power of the sky” (52–53). He decides to pursue the study of electricity in preference to his other studies. He sustains this decision over the course of two years, during which time he devises and performs innumerable tests. At each step he specifies what he knows (e.g., metal draws the power forth), how he knows it (because he saw lightning repeatedly hit a tall iron rod), and what he does not yet know (“what this power is,” “whence it comes,” how it relates to the artifacts from the Unmentionable Times). He then continues working to answer the remaining questions. Every component of this process is *self-consciously chosen* as part of the larger project of understanding the strange new power. The process requires an awareness of what *he* knows, and how *he* knows it.

This need for self-awareness is especially acute when Prometheus’ conclusions come into conflict with the conventional opinions that he has been taught. Conventional wisdom has it that the loadstone always points North and that this cannot be changed, yet Prometheus has seen the power of the sky make the needle on the compass move (53). Without distinguishing himself from others, it would be impossible for Prometheus to decide whether his observation or the generalization which forbids it is more authoritative.¹⁶

In general, “thought is a process that must be initiated and directed at each step by the choice of one man, the thinker.”¹⁷ The self-direction in this process requires a constant cognizance of the self as distinct both from the objects of study and from other consciousnesses. The concept “I” makes this perspective on oneself second nature, and it is the constant need for this perspective that makes the concept mandatory.¹⁸

In short, it is because of *metaphysical individualism* that we need the concept “I.” In the words of the *OED*, men are “self-determined wholes” who “if they act upon each other at all do so only externally.” But to say that a man is self-determined is to say that he is the “cause of causes,” “determining factor,” or “basic initiative” of his thoughts and actions. And, if men act on each other “only externally,” then, in the words of Howard Roark:

No man can use his brain to think for another. All the functions of body and spirit are private. They cannot be shared or transferred.

We inherit the products of the thought of other men. . . . But all through the process what we receive from others is only the end product of their thinking. The moving force is the creative faculty which takes this product as material, uses it and originates the next step. This creative faculty cannot be given or received, shared or borrowed. It belongs to single, individual men.¹⁹

This is the metaphysics of individualism. It tells us that thinking can only be performed by men as individuals. And, since thinking is a complex activity, to perform it a man needs a pervasive self-consciousness; he needs to be constantly aware of himself as an individual; he needs the concept “I.”²⁰

The perverse language of the City is founded on the opposite, collectivist premise. It forces the thinker to consider himself primarily a part of some larger whole, and it inculcates the view of consciousness that would be necessary if the mind were inherently social. But collectivism is false. The only alternative to *individual* thinking and valuing is the sort of passive demurrer from judgment that we saw Rand discuss in her journals, and this is not a form of thinking or valuing at all. A man whose mind works this way is a passive nothing moved at random by accidental influences.

The mind is an attribute of the individual and operates by self-direction. Its proper functioning thus requires the constant self-awareness provided by the concept “I.” A man needs this concept to think and to value just as he needs the concept “justice” to render a just verdict. Indeed the very concepts “thought” and “value” depend on the vocabulary of individualism, just as the concepts “verdict” and “mistrial” depend on the concept “justice.”

Collectivism (and the City’s language in particular) is guilty of the fallacy Rand called “concept stealing”: it uses concepts while ignoring or denying the antecedent knowledge on which they depend.²¹ Earlier we saw Rand note that actions are impossible without entities to act—that verbs presuppose nouns. At the time we were concerned with a metaphysical point: there cannot be actions without (individual) entities to carry them out. But there is an epistemological point here as well: there cannot be knowledge of actions without knowledge of entities capable of performing them. In order to learn about walking, for example, one must know about animals with legs. Not only do we need to know about legged animals to know about walking, we need to have conceptualized them. Imagine trying to understand what it means

to walk without using any concepts denoting legged animals; the mind would boggle. Thus the concept “walk” presupposes concepts denoting legged animals, and, in general, “a verb presupposes a noun.”

But the City dwellers use verbs denoting mental actions while negating the noun these verbs presuppose. All our concepts of consciousness were formed by self-conscious individuals introspecting the actions of their own minds.²² (And, as we saw earlier, many of these actions would not even be possible without the concept “I.”) Thus all our concepts of consciousness presuppose metaphysical individualism, and so these concepts lose their meaning when this presupposition is denied. But the City dwellers appropriate concepts of consciousness while denying the existence of the individual mind and censoring the concepts by means of which a man can be aware of himself.

The fact that one concept presupposes another does not mean that every man who uses the later concept understands the earlier one.²³ It is possible to use a word without grasping its meaning. Starting from a habit of doing so,

people find it impossible to grasp higher abstractions, and their conceptual development consists of condensing fog into fog into thicker fog—until the hierarchical structure of concepts breaks down in their minds, losing all ties to reality; and, as they lose the capacity to understand, their education becomes a process of memorizing and imitating.

Words, as such people use them, denote unidentified feelings, unadmitted motives, subconscious urges, chance associations, memorized sounds, ritualistic formulas, second-hand cues—all of it hung, like barnacles, on some swimming suggestion of some existential referent. (*ITOE*, 75–76)

This sort of confusion makes possible every sort of conceptual fallacy, including the most evil:

the destruction of language—and, therefore, of thought and, therefore, of communication—by means of anti-concepts. An anti-concept is an unnecessary and rationally unusable term designed to replace and obliterate some legitimate concept.²⁴

The City’s language is the end result of this practice.²⁵ “We”, as used by the City dwellers, is a stolen concept. “We” denotes a group of people including oneself. Without a prior distinction

between self and others this would be impossible—without “I” it would be impossible to distinguish between “we” and “they.” Sometimes honest error can result in stolen concepts and other “rationally unusable terms,” but this is not the case with “the great WE” (19). It is an anti-concept devised expressly to replace “I,” and to destroy individualism.

Thus the City’s language hampers Prometheus by forcing him to go through contortions in order to think of himself as an individual. But concepts cannot be obliterated without leaving traces. All of the concepts that the City dwellers steal depend for their meaning on a recognition of the individual mind. Insofar as the Councils succeed in censoring such a recognition, they render the concepts meaningless. But an active mind can recapture the concepts. It will be focused on reality, and so will be able to reconstruct the logic behind the empty words rehearsed by others. The Councils can destroy concepts, but they cannot destroy the facts they name. These facts remain and can be discovered, but they “are not for all men to see . . . only for those who will seek them” (52).

PROMETHEUS’ DISCOVERY OF HIMSELF AS A VALUER

Readers of *Anthem* have access to Prometheus’ most private thoughts “put down upon a paper no others are to see” (17). Every sentence is evidence of an active mind that wills to seek facts—of an author who strives for full clarity, never contenting himself with the vague or approximate. For example, consider how Prometheus describes steel when he first encounters it in his tunnel: “On the ground there were long thin tracks of iron, but it was not iron; it felt smooth and cold as glass” (32). He does not rest content with his initial identification of the metal as iron, nor even with a vague differentiation of it from iron; he specifies how it differs.

For a more striking example, consider Prometheus’ reaction when he realizes that the tunnel is left from the Unmentionable Times:

[W]e thought “This is a foul place. They are damned who touch the things of the Unmentionable Times.” But our hand which followed the track, as we crawled, clung to the iron as if it would not leave it, as if the skin of our hand were thirsty and begging of the metal some secret fluid beating in its coldness. (33)

The specter of damnation must create an impulse to evade either the origin of the metal or his attraction to it. Prometheus could leave these facts unnamed or rationalize away his feelings. Instead he identifies and records the whole truth. He will allow nothing—certainly no emotion—to stand between his mind and reality. For the same reason, when he takes an action he regards as a sin, he acknowledges it as such. In the words of another Ayn Rand hero: he wants “no pretense, no evasion, no silent indulgence, with the nature of [his] actions left unnamed.”²⁶ His first allegiance always is to reality.

According to Objectivism, such a commitment to truth is the essence of morality. It consists in a choice that must be renewed in every moment. Indeed, it is man’s basic choice:

[T]hat which you call “free will” is your mind’s freedom to think or not, the only will you have, your only freedom, the choice that controls all the choices you make and determines your life and your character.²⁷

This choice confronts us in the form of the alternative between *focusing* our minds to “a full, active, purposefully directed awareness of reality” or drifting in a “semi-conscious daze.” A man out of focus is passive and moved by chance; his consciousness, such as it is, is not the author of any thoughts. Such a man holds no convictions and no values, but merely reacts to stimuli “at the mercy of his undirected sensory-perceptual mechanism and of any random, associational connections it might happen to make.”²⁸ If a man is habitually out of focus, his mind serves as a repository for stale dogmas and rote behaviors, picked up at random from others. To paraphrase from *The Fountainhead*: “such a man is not there, he’s not alive, he has no I.”²⁹

We have already discussed how the individual consciousness (the I) is the noun presupposed as the subject of mental verbs such as “think” and “value.” We can now see that this consciousness must *will itself into existence*.³⁰ Prometheus is a man who constantly does this. He wills to seek knowledge and then to act on it. It is this activity—the very essence of human life—that creates the basis and the need for the concept “I.”

It is primarily by introspection on his own functioning and observation of its consequences that Prometheus recaptures the concept “I” and discovers individualism. But the collectivism with which he has been indoctrinated skews the way he initially conceptualizes and evaluates the introspective data: “We were born with a curse. It has always driven us to thoughts which are forbidden. It has always given us wishes which men may not wish” (18). In fact this curse is just a subconscious habituated to the

demands of a focused mind. Well stocked with values and brimming with fresh connections, it is the result of a constant *willing* to seek the facts.³¹ The curse “whispers . . . that there are great things on this earth of ours, and that we can know them if we try, and that we must know them” (24).

Prometheus loves the Science of Things and wants to be a scholar, thus committing the Transgression of Preference, and he believes that there are mysteries, despite the Councils’ claim that there are none. These preferences and beliefs are not causeless. Prometheus longs to be sent to the Home of the Scholars because “all the great modern inventions” come from it and because these inventions have their origin in the scientific study that Prometheus loves. His belief that there are mysteries and great things to be discovered is based on his own observations of nature. His claim that there are mysteries “in the sky and under the water and in the plants that grow” suggests that he has specific mysteries in mind based on specific observations. That Prometheus is continually making such observations is clear from his descriptions of twilight and evening respectively: “The shadows are blue on the pavements, and the sky is blue with a deep brightness which is not bright”; “The sky is like a black sieve pierced by silver drops that tremble, ready to burst through. The moths beat against the street lanterns” (27–28). Such careful observation will suggest questions: What causes the peculiar look of twilight? What is the “brightness that is not bright”? In what way is it different from a normal brightness? Why do the stars tremble? Why are moths attracted to flame? If Prometheus chooses to keep his mind active and to attend to nature, then these sorts of mysteries will necessarily occur to him. If he notices his aptitude for this sort of thought, the joy he takes in it, and its practical value (in leading to “modern inventions”), then it is no surprise that he develops a passion for science. Prometheus’ “curse” is just a habit of being *mentally active*.³²

Notice how Prometheus’ mental activity is evident in the way he deals with his “curse.” He conceptualizes it, inquires into its nature, and works to combat it. Rather than passively accepting a vague sense of discomfort during his years in the Home of the Students, he *concludes* that the quickness of his mind is evil and he *devises* and *enacts* a plan to correct it (viz., emulating Union 5-3992, “they of the half-brain” [29].) When his curse whispers that he must know the answers to the mysteries, he *asks* why he must know. When he accepts his disappointing Life Mandate his “voice was the clearest, the steadiest voice in the hall” (26) because he has *identified* the mandate as a way to atone for his “sins” and has *chosen* to accept it as such. Prometheus is consistently active even

in his attempts to conform to the passivity demanded by his society.

Prometheus' values and conclusions—the consequences of his mental activity—put him in constant conflict with his society. He has questions, but the teachers forbid them. He has reason to believe that there are mysteries but the Councils say that there are none. He wants to be a Scholar, so that he can “ask questions of [the rivers, sands, winds, and rocks], for they do not forbid questions” (24). But the Teachers tell him not to choose a profession, and the Council of Vocations determines that he is most needed as a street sweeper. He notices Gaea's dark, hard, glowing eyes and her wild golden hair, but “men are forbidden to take notice of women” (38). When he sees the Transgressor of the Unspeakable Word, he notices the calmness, joy, and pride on his face, and thinks of him as a saint, but this is a “monstrous thought” (50). In every way, Prometheus is in constant conflict with others from his days in the Home of the Infants onward. These conflicts all derive from the distinctive *thoughts* and *values* of a mind that chooses to think. They serve as a constant sign that Prometheus is “one . . . alone . . . and only.”

Prometheus has two core values: his scientific career and Gaea. It is reflection on these values which brings him ultimately to grasp individualism. The first step in his progression is noticing that *he* chooses these values because they have a special significance *to him*.

The intensity of Prometheus' love for science is directly introspectable; he desires to be sent to the Home of the Scholars so much that his “hands trembled under the blankets in the night” and he experiences this desire in the form of an unendurable pain (24). The teachers' warnings against choosing a career serve to underscore what Prometheus is doing in wishing to be a scholar, and the unusual circumstances in which he is finally able to study make it especially clear that this activity is *chosen by him*. Already in his first journal entry, Prometheus writes: “We alone, of all the thousands that walk this earth, we alone in this hour are doing a work that has no purpose save that we wish to do it” (36). Prometheus is aware too of the emotional rewards of this work. It makes him “feel as if with each day our sight were growing sharper than the hawk's and clearer than rock crystal” (36), and it brings peace to his heart.

The theme of an intense personal response prompting self-consciously distinctive choices is present too in Prometheus' love for Gaea. At first sight of her he knows fear for the first time and feels a “pain more precious than pleasure” (39). It is his love for her that makes him “feel of a sudden that the earth is good and that it is not a burden to live” (41). This leads him to be glad to be

alive, and to endorse this emotion in self-conscious defiance of the City's moral code. He writes: "If this is vice, then we wish no virtue" (47). The positive emotions Prometheus experiences as a result of pursuing science and meeting Gaea are new to him. He will later observe that "the only things which taught us joy were the power we created in our wires, and the Golden One" (86).

This new-found joy raises questions and makes possible a new observation about his brothers. It is a dogma of the City that all men are happy, but it is now evident to Prometheus that this is not so. His brothers have dull, evasive eyes, hunched shoulders, and bowed heads,

and their muscles are drawn as if their bodies were shrinking and wished to shrink out of sight. And a word steals into our minds, as we look upon our brothers, and that word is fear. (46)

Prior to learning joy from his love for Gaea, Prometheus knows of no state with which to contrast the miserable fear "hanging in the air of the sleeping halls and in the streets" (46). It is his own happiness that allows him to see that "our brothers are not like us. All is not well with our brothers" (47).

The City dwellers have no values and so they have none of the emotions that stem from the pursuit and attainment of values, nor do they really understand the concepts for values and the emotions that flow from them.³³ (If they did, they would not be able to maintain that all men are happy.) All of their evaluative concepts are stolen. This is why Prometheus' evaluations of his own actions in terms of the code of the City have no motivational force—repeating the city's laws to himself has no effect, and he does not feel guilty when he breaks them. It is only the values that *he chooses* that give meaning to evaluative concepts. For example, notice how the idea of a saint becomes meaningful to him only through the image of the Transgressor of the Unspeakable Word, an individual who has chosen and achieved real values and in whom Prometheus (the incipient valuer) can recognize real virtue.

Once his chosen values have breathed life into his evaluative concepts, Prometheus can see how unhappy his brothers are. Although he is not yet ready to break with the City, he begins to contemplate alternatives to it. His mind is drawn to the Uncharted Forest and the Unmentionable Times, and he recalls the Saint of the pyre.³⁴

We have discussed how valuing depends on a mental activity—on selecting and judging. But these mental actions are not sufficient for valuing. A value isn't something that one merely *evaluates* as worth having, it is something one *pursues* as a result

of such an evaluation. An unpursued value is not a value at all, but an empty wish.

Prometheus' values demand specific existential actions from him. In order to study he must *claim* the tunnel, *sneak* out to it night after night, and *steal* candles, knives, manuscripts, and other supplies. In order to understand the power of the sky he must take all the actions we discussed earlier. Even in cases where it is not clear how he can achieve or protect his values, Prometheus operates on the premise of acting to attain and defend his values. Thus he resolves to prevent Gaea from going to the Palace of Mating though he does not know "How to prevent it, how to bar the will of the Councils," and when telling Gaea that sweeping the road by her Home is his regular assignment, he adds a resolution that "no one will take this road away from us" (44–45).

So Prometheus chooses his values and he acts to realize them. From his successes in his scientific work, he comes to see himself as the achiever of his values. In his third entry, he writes that he knows things that the Council does not because he seeks knowledge. In particular he knows about the power of the sky because he took the specific actions necessary to discover it. The emphasis in this entry is on the fact that he is alone in his knowledge because "the secrets of this earth are not for all men to see, but only for those who will seek them" (52). He alone knows because he alone sought. This realization runs counter to the City's dogma that "we all know the things which exist" (52), but it is undeniable. It leads Prometheus to renew his dedication to the study of the power, forgetting "all men, all laws, and all things save our metal and our wires" (54). This in turn leads to a greater achievement: the invention of the light.

The entry discussing the invention is pervaded by a euphoric self-confidence. It begins: "We made it. We created it. We brought it forth from the night of the ages. We alone. Our hands. Our mind. Ours alone and only" (59). In the previous entry on electricity, his solitude was acknowledged and accepted. Now it is celebrated.

Prometheus goes on to discuss the meaning of his achievement. He proceeds from its immediate practical applications of lighting his tunnel and then his and other cities to its wider significance:

The power of the sky can be used to do men's bidding. There are no limits to its secrets and its might, and it can be made to grant us anything if we but choose to ask. (60)

This gives him a profound sense of himself as an achiever. In appreciating the power and value of the light, he is also

appreciating the power and value of its *producer*—of himself. Thus in valuing the light he comes to value himself, to care about what happens to his body. And in wondering at the light's power, he comes to wonder about his own strength and appearance. The wire is a part of him, "as a vein torn from us, glowing with our blood" (61).

The analogy is apt. It is glowing with his blood in that its glow is due to his self-generated effort. He has spent part of *his life* animating it. There is a second, related sense in which the wire is like one of Prometheus' veins. A vein is an organ that contributes to the life of the organism, and its meaning and value lie in this fact. The light is a part of Prometheus in this sense as well. The light's meaning and value lie in the contribution it can make to his life. The box is a part of Prometheus' life. It was created by *his energy* to serve *his ends*. It would not exist without his efforts, and it is worthless outside of the context of his life and his values.

Prometheus does not immediately grasp this second sense of his analogy. Just as the corrupt concepts and values he learned from the City cause him initially to misidentify his mind as a curse, they lead him to misidentify the nature of the light's value and his motives in inventing it. He conceives of the light's value in terms of its use to his brothers, and he thinks he invented it for their sake. This is understandable. Without the concept "I" to keep himself clearly differentiated from his brothers, it would be impossible for Prometheus to evaluate the light in terms of its meaning for *his* life. Prometheus does not even distinguish between his life and that of the group's. He is aware that he pursues clandestine evening studies in a tunnel, but three hours a night in isolation does not make for a *life of one's own*. It is only later, when he finds himself alone in the Forest, that he begins to contemplate solitude as such. Even then he thinks that a solitary life is both impossible and corrupt (76). Thus Prometheus cannot yet conceive of his life as distinct from that of his Brothers. Consequently, though he can recognize the light as *his* invention, he cannot see its meaning in terms of *his own life*. Also, Prometheus knows no code of values other than the one taught him by his society. By this point in the novel he has formed and achieved values of his own, but he has not discovered how they fit together into a whole, and he does not understand what makes them values. Yet he needs such an integrated perspective on values—he needs a code of values—in order to assess the significance of such a profound value as the light.

The moral code Prometheus needs will elude him until he learns the concept "I." However, the Scholars' rejection of the light explodes his altruistic misconception of the light's value. It makes him realize that the light is of no value to his brothers and that he

did not make it for their sake. This realization is a crucial step towards rediscovering “I” and grasping egoism. In his evaluation of the light Prometheus assumes a standard of value alien to the Scholars. The light is good because it can be made to do man’s bidding, because it can be used to ease the toil of men and to flood the cities with light, because it is “the key to the earth” (71). In *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand identifies Man’s Life—the specific type of life required by man’s nature for his survival—as the standard of value, and she shows that men do not value their lives automatically. In *Anthem* she has not yet formulated this standard, but all of Prometheus’ evaluations presuppose a valuing of life on earth. He sees all his values as contributing either to life itself or to its enjoyment. The analogy between his light and a vein is particularly striking in this regard.

Prometheus has specific values, and he values the successful life that is their sum. Therefore *he* evaluates the light as a profound value. This makes it a great value *to him*. But the Scholars do not value their lives. They do not even care whether they live or die, “which is to be as our brothers will it” (47). Nor do they have any other actual values. If the value of the light resides in its ability to increase one’s standard of living, it will be of no value to men who do not wish to live. If the value of the power of the sky is that it can grant men anything they ask for, the power will be of no value to those who seek nothing. Prometheus expects the Scholars to appreciate the value of the light and his value as its creator, but neither Prometheus nor his light is of any value to the Scholars. Both are threats to their mindless, valueless routine. Thus the Scholars respond with fear, and they seek to destroy the light and its creator.

To protect the light, Prometheus flees the City. The encounter with the Scholars has made it clear to him that he did not design the light for his brothers:

We have lied to ourselves. We have not built this box for the good of our brothers. We built it for its own sake. It is above all our brothers to us, and its truth is above their truth. (76)

When it was clear that his brothers did not value the box, he did not seek a more appropriate way to serve them, as he would have if the box were really *for them*. Rather he protected the box from them by taking it into the Uncharted Forest. If the box were made for their good, this action would be incomprehensible. Perhaps on an altruistic premise Prometheus could resent the Scholars and think they were foolish not to see the value of the box, but he could not flee the City removing the box from the very conditions that make it a value—the needs of his brothers.

If Prometheus were to remain in the City, abandoning the box and seeking a more appropriate way to serve his brothers, he would have to surrender his mind. Service to others and independent thought are incompatible. Prometheus cannot *make* his brothers value the box or benefit from it. He cannot force the City to adopt the new technology. (Even if he could, the light would not be a value to his brothers; they would adopt it in the fearful, joyless manner in which they do everything else.) Thus to remain in the City, Prometheus would have to sacrifice the light. In doing so, he would be sacrificing his greatest achievement *and his judgment*. Leonard Peikoff explains the relevant principle:

If you know enough to see the tie between cognition (knowledge) and your choice and ability to act and achieve, then you know that your mind is a function in both choosing and achieving these values. An assault on your action is an assault also on the conclusions which lead you to that [action], which is an assault on your mind.³⁵

If Prometheus accepted the Scholars' decision to destroy the light, he would be renouncing his mind by placing "his brothers' truth" above what he knows to be true. The Scholars claim that there are no mysteries, that individual men are impotent, and therefore, that the light Prometheus created on his own is impossible, unreal, and worthless. But Prometheus has discovered that there are such mysteries, and he knows that the light is good and that he produced it on his own.

Prometheus' whole method of functioning—his seeking the truth and his selecting and achieving values—is inconsistent with an ethics that demands service to his brothers. Yet it is only this method of functioning that gives rise to values and to evaluative concepts. Values as such only exist for *valuers*—individuals who select and produce. Thus the facts that give rise to values are incompatible with the altruistic morality of the City. An egoistic ethics is inherent in individual valuing, and this is the only sort of valuing there is. But Prometheus does not see all this immediately; describing his state of mind when leaving the Home of the Scholars, he writes: "We knew only that we must run" (75).

PROMETHEUS' DISCOVERY OF INDIVIDUALISM

When Prometheus first arrives in the Forest, he has not yet explicitly rejected the collectivist philosophy of the City, much less formulated the individualistic alternative he espouses in his final

two journal entries. His deepest value has just come into conflict with the only morality he has ever known. To save it he abandoned the City and its standards. But he knows no other way to live. He wants no part of the City—of the “truth which is our brother men”—but he knows no alternative (76). As far as he knows, life apart from the collective is impossible. He has learned of the possibility of discrete private values and achievements, but only as an exception to a collectivized life. Thus when he arrives in the Forest he expects to die. He is dejected, so much so that he is disinterested even in answering the moral questions raised by his encounter with the Scholars. Thinking of the way he values the box ahead of his brothers, he asks: “Why wonder about this? We have not many days to live” (76–77). Before he can progress philosophically, he needs to see that the pattern he observed in his invention of the light applies to values more generally. In particular, he needs to see that it applies to values most immediately relevant to survival.

When he awakes the next day his mood is lighter. He suddenly realizes his new freedom and it makes him giddy. Yet he still lacks direction and perspective. If the first day in the Forest is a “day of wonder,” it is still a collection of discrete wonderful experiences not yet seen as components of a new life. The day contains an event crucial to Prometheus’ philosophical development.

We stopped when we felt hunger. We saw birds in the tree branches, and flying from under our footsteps. We picked a stone and we sent it as an arrow at a bird. It fell before us. We made a fire, we cooked the bird, and we ate it, and no meal had ever tasted better to us. And we thought suddenly that there was a great satisfaction to be found in the food which we need and obtain by our own hand. And we wished to be hungry again and soon, that we might know again this strange new pride in eating.
(79)

The significance of this event should be clear. It shows both that on his own Prometheus is competent to produce the basic values necessary for his survival and that these values acquire an added meaning when he produces them for himself. Notice that the satisfaction Prometheus takes in eating stems not just from his obtaining the food by his own hand, but also from his satisfying his own need. Prior to this point, the relationship between his values and his own person was not clear to him. Prometheus knew since childhood that he had his own wishes, but he did not understand the relationship between the objects of these wishes and himself. In

his discussion of the power of the sky, he mentions how great the power is, that it can be made to do men's bidding, and that it is the key to the earth, but he never mentions its specific effects on him. He does see the glowing wire as a part of him, comparing it to a vein, but he does not grasp the full significance of this. He sees it as his vein in the sense that it carries his blood, but not in the sense that it carries it in service of his needs. In the past when he has experienced personal needs (the unendurable pain of wishing for a career as a Scholar, and the longing for Gaea) he was unaware of their source and their connection to the rest of his life. The case of the bird is different. The role and source of hunger is obvious. And it is to serve this need that he finds and kills his dinner. The value and the achievement are self-evidently and self-consciously in the service of a *need* of his *own*.

The significance of this new observation is marked in the tenth journal entry in the way Prometheus explains why the house they discover is theirs alone:

This is your house, Golden One, and ours, and it belongs to no other men whatever as far as the earth may stretch. We shall not share it with others, as we share not our joy with them, nor our love, nor our hunger. (105)

Where love is a form of valuing and joy is an emotional response to values, hunger is an indication of a need. Its place at the end of the list is significant. The list goes from effect to (partial) cause. They share joy because they value each other. But now Prometheus is beginning to see that values are in response to needs, and that these needs are *private*. It is in part because of this that values and their emotional consequences are private, and that property should be privately owned.³⁶

Before entering the Forest, Prometheus had grasped two ways in which he as an individual was responsible for his values: he chose them and he achieved them. It is only with the killing of the bird that he begins to grasp a third way in which he is responsible for his values: they are necessary because of *his needs*. The role of his own needs in his values and actions is evident in every element of his life in the Forest. He needs to make arrows to kill birds, and he needs to find clearings to sleep in and to build fires around the clearings to provide for his safety. Eventually he will need to build a house.

The killing of the bird and the strange new pride in eating it are the beginning of Prometheus' realization of the role of his needs in his values. This realization is the completion of the thought he glimpsed when he analogized the wire to one of his veins. *He is the achiever of his values and these values serve his*

needs. It is fitting then that Prometheus uses the word “pride”³⁷ when discussing both his creation of the light and his killing of the bird. Notice also that immediately after each achievement he takes an interest in his own body. In his tunnel after creating the light, he notices the strength of his arms and wonders what he looks like. He finds out immediately after eating the bird when he comes upon a stream and sees his reflection in it for the first time. Unlike his brothers he is beautiful and strong.

By the time Gaea finds Prometheus on his second day in the Forest, he has not yet processed all of his new observations, but he now sees the possibility of an independent life in the Forest and invites Gaea to discover such a life with him:

Our dearest one. Fear nothing of the forest. There is no danger in solitude. We have no need of our brothers. Let us forget their good and our evil, let us forget all things save that we are together and that there is joy as a bond between us. Give us your hand. Look ahead. It is our own world, Golden One, a strange, unknown world, but our own. (83–84)

It is in the context of this new, self-sufficient, joyous life that he begins to reflect explicitly on morality for the first time. His thinking begins with reflection on the code of the City that “Everything which comes from the many is good” and “Everything which comes from one is evil.” “We have broken the law,” he writes, “but we have never doubted it. Yet now, as we walk through the forest, we are learning to doubt” (85–86). The questions abound:

If that which we have found is the corruption of solitude, then what can men wish for save corruption? If this is the great evil of being alone, then what is good and what is evil? (85)

There is no life for men, save in useful toil for the good of all their brothers. But we lived not, when we toiled for our brothers, we were only weary. There is no joy for men, save the joy shared with all their brothers. But the only things which taught us joy were the power we created in our wires, and the Golden One. And both these joys belong to us alone, they come from us alone, they bear no relation to our brothers, and they do not concern our brothers in any way. Thus do we wonder.

There is some error, one frightful error, in the thinking of men. What is that error? We do not

know, but the knowledge struggles within us,
struggles to be born. (86)

There is an inner contradiction in the code of the City. In denying the individual and demanding that one live for others, the City dwellers undercut the roots of valuing. Thus they destroy values and the emotions that stem from them. They make life meaningless. Prometheus *lived* only insofar as he broke this code, insofar as he pursued, achieved, and enjoyed values that did not concern his brothers in any way. Prometheus sees this, yet he is unable to articulate it. The knowledge struggles within him to be born. It is in the context of this struggle that Prometheus tells us of Gaea's halting attempt to express her love for him.

Today, the Golden One stopped suddenly
and said:

“We love you.”

But then they frowned and shook their head
and looked at us helplessly.

“No,” they whispered, “that is not what we
wished to say.”

They were silent, then they spoke slowly,
and their words were halting, like the words of a
child learning to speak for the first time:

“We are one . . . alone . . . and only . . . and
we love you who are one . . . alone . . . and only.”

We looked into each other's eyes and we
knew that the breath of a miracle had touched us,
and fled, and left us groping vainly.

And we felt torn, torn for some word we
could not find. (86–87)

It is the vain groping that connects Gaea's attempted profession of love with Prometheus' attempt to identify the frightful error in the thinking of men. And it is here that it becomes clear to Prometheus that what he is missing is a word, that there is some defect in the way he and Gaea have been taught to think of themselves, and that there is a need to conceptualize themselves as each “one . . . alone . . . and only.” Had Prometheus not found the word “I” in manuscripts from the Unmentionable Times, he would have soon formed the concept on his own, because he sees the need for it and he sees that need in relation to his moral questions.

Prometheus shows us in his eleventh entry that he has grasped the concept “I” and answered his moral questions. Fittingly, his need for the concept and for an answer to these questions is most evident in the conclusion of the tenth entry. He writes sitting at a table in the new house where he and Gaea have

resolved to spend the rest of their lives. He is free and well equipped to provide for his needs and to continue his studies. Yet something is still missing:

And now we look upon the earth and sky. This spread of naked rock and peaks and moonlight is like a world ready to be born, a world that waits. It seems to us it asks a sign from us, a spark, a first commandment. We cannot know what word we are to give, nor what great deed this earth expects to witness. We know it waits. It seems to say it has great gifts to lay before us, but it wishes a greater gift from us. We are to speak. We are to give its goal, its highest meaning to all this glowing space of rock and sky. (92–93)

Prometheus sees that value comes from him in all the senses discussed above. He sees the earth as raw material for his values. He plans to spend his life in his own house, providing for his own needs, pursuing values that bring him joy, with the woman he loves. Yet each of these observations and intentions is a discrete unit in his thought. He can notice connections between them and, with work, he can name and retain these connections. But they do not comprise a unity. Thus Prometheus' world, like his knowledge, *waits to be born*. In particular, it waits for a certain *word* from him. It is only with the advent of the concept "I" that Prometheus' knowledge and values are integrated into a whole in which each observation and value reinforces the others.

I stand here on the summit of the mountain. I lift my head and I spread my arms. This, my body and spirit, this is the end of the quest. I wished to know the meaning of things. I am the meaning. I wished to find a warrant for being. I need no warrant for being, and no word of sanction upon my being. I am the warrant and the sanction. (94)

The basic facts expressed in Prometheus' eleventh journal entry, his anthem to individualism, are all things he had already observed. But the concept "I" allows him to see their interconnection and their implications.

He begins with the assertion that *he* exists, thinks, and wills. He knew all of this before; what is new is the individualistic emphasis provided by the concept "I." He continues with a personal claim to *his* hand, spirit, sky, forest, and earth. When Gaea first found him in the forest, he had told her that the world belonged to them. Again, what is new in the eleventh entry is the emphasis provided by the first-person singular.

From at least the time of his third journal entry he grasps that he discovers the truth by the independent exercise of his own mind, and in the subsequent entries he gradually grasps how the meaning of his values is also a result of his own thought and choice. But the concept “I” automatizes the self-emphasis, freeing Prometheus to carry the thought further than he was able to before.

It is my eyes which see, and the sight of my eyes
grants beauty to the earth. It is my ears which hear,
and the hearing of my ears gives its song to the
world. It is my mind which thinks, and the
judgment of my mind is the only searchlight that
can find the truth. It is my will which *chooses*, and
the choice of my will is the only edict I must
respect. (94)

He can now draw a conclusion from the facts that his consciousness makes values possible, his judgment identifies truths, and his will chooses values based on these truths: he is the warrant for his own being, and the choice of his will (based on his judgment of truth) is the only edict he must respect. Thus he sees *his will* as holy.

Before the eleventh entry he had found happiness and he had resolved not to surrender it. Only now can he formulate the principle involved: that *his* happiness is an end in itself. “It is *the* end. It is its own goal. It is its own purpose” (95, emphasis added). Thus Prometheus grasps *egoism*. Increasingly Prometheus has been living from himself and for himself, but now he can identify this fact, celebrate it, and self-consciously dedicate himself to it: “This miracle of me is mine to own and keep, and mine to guard, and mine to use, and mine to kneel before” (95).

The concept “I” inaugurates a frenzy of new integrations. From his grasp of egoism, he proceeds immediately to its social and political implications. If his happiness is an end in itself, then he is not “the means to any ends others may wish to accomplish” (95). Thus he neither lives for his brothers nor asks them to live for him. As he chooses all his values, he chooses his friends, and the nature of the relationships he chooses with them is set by the principle that each man is an end in himself free to associate or not with others as he wishes.

For in the temple of his spirit, each man is alone.
Let each man keep his temple untouched and
undefiled. Then let him join hands with others if he
wishes, but only beyond his holy threshold. (96)

While walking through the Forest, he knew that there was a fearful error in the thought of man, an error that results in the

living death of toiling for one's brothers, but now he can identify this error as a violation of the principle that forms the basis of proper human relationships. Relationships are a value when based on the judgment and choice of the individuals—they are a value only when “we” is spoken “as a second thought” after “I.” But the City dwellers reverse this by demanding that “we” be “placed first within man's soul.” This is the error which he had struggled to grasp. Now with the concept “I” he can identify this “creed of corruption” and repudiate it (96–97).

In the twelfth entry, Prometheus relates his new philosophical knowledge with what he has just learned of world history. He grasps that “the structure of the centuries” was the result of *egoism*. Its “every beam had come from the thought of some one man, each in his day down the ages, from the depth of some one spirit, such spirit as existed but for its own sake.” Just as he created his light for his own sake and his brothers sought to destroy it, so other individualists had produced the wonders of the Unmentionable Times—“the steel towers, the flying ships, the power wires”—and it was the “worship of the word ‘We’” that destroyed these achievements (102).

The difference between the tenth and eleventh entries—between an inchoate mass of judgments and a philosophy—is the condensation and integration provided by the concept “I.” The concept is necessary because of man's need to think and act self-consciously as an individual. It enables him to see himself as the locus of thoughts and values and thus to *direct* his life. The doctrine of egoism is the culmination of the self-conscious direction demanded by metaphysical individualism and made possible by the concept “I.”

ANTHEM'S ARGUMENT

As part of a 1997 series of lectures entitled *Objectivism Through Induction*, Leonard Peikoff discusses the steps by which a thinker would initially discover and justify egoism.³⁸ The progression he sketches is essentially the same as the one Prometheus follows, and reviewing it will give us a more abstract perspective on the argument traced in the steps of Prometheus' discovery.

Peikoff argues that in order for a thinker to discover that his own interest should be the supreme end of his actions, he would first need to grasp the concept of self-interest, which itself depends on the concept “value.” A value is “that which one acts to gain and/or keep.”³⁹ To grasp the concept, as it applies in the human case, one needs to grasp that men *act* to achieve goals that they have *chosen* in accordance with some *standard*. Peikoff projects that a thinker would first grasp that all the things that he pursues

and treasures are things that he *chose* (as opposed to passively accepted). He would then grasp that his values must be achieved by him in action and subsequently would formulate a standard of value.

Peikoff points out that the act of choosing is directly introspectable and that the role of choice in a man's values is especially evident to him in cases of conflict between his values and those of others. "There's a self-assertion in choosing values that has to strike you, or you won't get to egoism, and most people don't [get to egoism], because they don't choose their values." Prometheus does choose, and his choices do bring him into conflict with others. Even if he initially misidentifies his chosen values as the result of a "curse," by the time he writes his third journal entry he is certainly aware of the self-assertion involved in choosing values.

The second stage of the progression is realizing that each of one's values must be attained by one's own action, so that one thinks of himself as the "chooser and achiever of all [his] values." The dictatorial rule of the Councils severely limits Prometheus' opportunities to act in pursuit of his values,⁴⁰ but wherever there are such opportunities Prometheus takes them. Most importantly, he claims the tunnel and conducts his scientific research there. Thus he comes to recognize himself as the achiever of his values. (See especially chapters 3 and 5.)

After completing this second stage, a thinker has a clear concept of value, but it lacks content. To proceed, he needs "a whole series of values, a common denominator that makes them values—the standard—therefore giving [him] the idea of [his] own welfare or interest." The thinker would arrive at a standard of value by reflecting on a wide range of values and considering the pre-philosophical reasons he has for pursuing them. He would look for a common denominator that can unite them into an integrated conception of his interest.⁴¹ Peikoff argues that an intelligent, first-handed thinker would be able to grasp that all of his values contribute to his life and his enjoyment of it.

Prometheus never formulates a standard of value. In his ecstatic eleventh journal entry he writes that *his happiness* is its own purpose. But as Rand explains in "The Objectivist Ethics," there is a difference between a standard and a purpose. "[A] 'standard' is an abstract principle that serves as a measurement or gauge to guide a man's choices in the achievement of a concrete, specific purpose."⁴² If happiness is Prometheus' purpose, a standard would be a principle by which he can gauge what will actually promote his happiness.

To take "whatever makes one happy" as a guide to action means: to be guided by nothing but one's

emotional whims. Emotions are not tools of cognition; to be guided by whims—by desires whose source, nature and meaning one does not know—is to turn oneself into a blind robot, operated by unknowable demons (by one's stale evasions), a robot knocking its stagnant brains out against the walls of reality which it refuses to see.⁴³

In her later writings Rand advocates Man's Life as the standard of value. The joyous life standard which Peikoff discusses in his lectures is considerably more primitive, but it is not subjective like "whatever makes one happy." Instead of judging goals in isolation by the feelings they evoke, it judges them by how they would fit into a holistic, if imprecise, conception of a happy life. Many of the values are seen as contributing to the preservation of life as such, others are seen as harmonizing with and enhancing these.⁴⁴

Though Prometheus never articulates such a standard, it is clear from the context of the novel that he is not a hedonist pursuing "whatever makes him happy." Rather the germs of the joyous life standard are implicit even in his earliest evaluations, and more elements of this standard emerge as he develops. Even as a child Prometheus sees that science is good in part because of its contribution to survival through such modern inventions as "glass, which is put in our windows to protect us from the rain" (24). When he masters electricity he assesses its meaning in terms of its potential to aid in production, and later he plans to use it to defend his home (100). Throughout the novel he is cognizant of the joy associated with each of his values. As he progresses, he begins to see connections between this joy and his survival needs. This is evident in his fascination with hunger in the Forest. So, while he never reaches a fully explicit standard of value, he is operating on the joyous life standard and the basis of his evaluations is self-conscious enough for him to progress to the final step of the progression Peikoff outlines.

A thinker who has reached the joyous life standard of value will understand values as "things I choose and achieve that foster life and the enjoyment of life." Such a thinker would be in a position to grasp egoism, the doctrine that each person should aim in all his actions at achieving such values *for himself*. What egoism advocates is "the pursuit in action by your own creative effort of objects chosen by you as necessary to your own life or happiness." It can be validated by seeing that this principle is inherent in the concept "value." One sees this by noticing in a range of cases that he *is* the intended beneficiary of his own values and by recognizing that the values could not be values if he pursued them for anyone else.

This is what Prometheus does. In the Forest he realizes that he created the light for its own sake, and for the joy it brought him. He sees too that he killed the bird to satisfy his own hunger, and that he wants Gaea because she is essential to his happiness. These values would be impossible if Prometheus lived for his brothers. Consider the case of the light: Prometheus chooses his scientific career and he chooses to study the power of the sky in particular. His brothers forbid this. Prometheus invests his time, his life, his thought, his blood, into creating and defending the light. It is the result of his passionate commitment, yet on the premise of altruism he must be indifferent to its fate—he must be willing to give it up to his brothers to use or to destroy. It is the requirements of Prometheus' life and happiness that make the light valuable. It would lessen labor leaving men more leisure time, it would enable new discoveries, it would unlock the earth. But it is only for Prometheus (and for those like him) that these things are values. His brothers do not want to unlock the earth and so the light is of no use to them. Moreover, they want to deprive Prometheus of its benefits.

Altruism, as Peikoff argues, is a “triple assault”: “it’s an assault on your choice, it’s an assault on your achievement, and it’s an assault on your life or enjoyment of it. In other words it’s an all-out destruction.”

In effect, altruism says: “You shouldn’t get the consequences of your choices, the results of your actions, you shouldn’t enjoy your life or even, perhaps, keep it.”

So we could summarize [the argument for egoism and against altruism] like this: You, in effect, created the values that we’re talking about in three different ways. Your choice made it possible for them to be values. Your action brought them into existence. Your life and happiness made it necessary for you to choose and act. All of that is inherent in the pattern of establishing what it was to value and to pursue a value. . . . The essence of altruism is to say: “Value something and then throw it away.” It wouldn’t be a value to anybody else if it isn’t a value, so it wouldn’t profit any beneficiary. So you’re supposed to: choose it [and] create it, [because] there’s a reason for it to be a value, and then annihilate it, get rid of it, abandon it. That is in the nature of the principle of altruism.

What we can say at this point is: “Egoism is an affirmation of all of the conditions of value and therefore of values as such. Altruism is the negation

of all of the conditions of valuing while demanding that you pursue values.

Altruism steals the concept “value,” but a thinker would not initially see it in these terms. Rather, by considering many cases, he would see that, in each instance, the factors that make the value *valuable* are undermined by the principle of altruism. From here he would generalize that inherent in something’s being a value is that *someone* chooses and achieves it because it enhances *his own* life. It is by this inductive argument that Prometheus reaches his philosophical conclusion.⁴⁵

Thus *Anthem* tells us that values presuppose metaphysical individualism and can only exist for some *individual* who *selects* and *achieves* them in pursuit of *his life and happiness*. In *Atlas Shrugged* Ayn Rand presents a full validation of egoism based “on an argument that the concept ‘value’ depends on the concept ‘life’ and so is only meaningful in the context of an organism pursuing its life as its ultimate value.”⁴⁶ *Anthem*’s argument is more preliminary, but it has a parallel structure. Both arguments work by showing that the facts presupposed by the concept “value” have implications for valuing. *Anthem*’s argument is that values are an inherently individualistic phenomenon, conceived by individual thought and choice, achieved by individual action, and meaningful only in the context of an individual’s life. It is these facts about value (and the related facts about thought) that make the concept “I” necessary. They constitute its meaning, which is *Anthem*’s theme. And they imply egoism and, through it, political individualism.⁴⁷

NOTES

1. This passage was not included in the book based on the course (Ayn Rand, *The Art of Nonfiction: A Guide for Writers and Readers*, ed. Robert Mayhew [New York: Plume, 2001]). Part of it appeared in Ayn Rand, *The Art of Fiction: A Guide for Writers and Readers*, edited by Tore Boeckmann (New York: Plume, 2000), 36.

2. In *For the New Intellectual* Rand states *Anthem*’s theme as “the meaning of man’s ego” (New York: Random House, 1961; paperback edition, Signet, 1963), 64. Interestingly, in a 1946 letter she writes that *Anthem* “has the same theme, spirit and intention” as *The Fountainhead* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1943; Signet fiftieth anniversary paperback edition, 1993). See Michael S. Berliner, ed., *Letters of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1995; paperback edition, Plume, 1997), 314, cf. 276. She identifies *The Fountainhead*’s theme as “individualism versus collectivism, not in politics, but in man’s soul; the psychological motivations and the basic premises that produce the

character of an individualist or a collectivist” (For *the New Intellectual*, 68). As will be clear from what follows, there is no contradiction between these different statements of the theme.

3. The theory was not published until significantly later. Rand presents it in *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* (henceforth *ITOE*), which was published first as a multi-part series in *The Objectivist* in 1966–1967, and then as a monograph in 1967. There is a more recent expanded second edition: Ayn Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, eds. Harry Binswanger and Leonard Peikoff (New York: Meridian, 1990).

4. Berliner, *Letters of Ayn Rand*, 33.

5. *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 1971 (henceforth *OED*).

6. I borrow this term from Allan Gotthelf, *On Ayn Rand* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000), 76.

7. On Prometheus’ assessment of his own character at different points in the novel, see Onkar Ghate’s “Breaking the Metaphysical Chains of Dictatorship: Free Will and Determinism in *Anthem*,” in this volume.

8. Interestingly, the English “you” is ambiguous between singular and plural. In the 1938 addition of *Anthem*, Gaea eventually learns to say “I love thee” (137). “Thee” is unambiguously singular. In the 1946 edition Gaea says “I love you” (98). The change was part of a larger program of eliminating archaic language. (See Robert Mayhew’s “*Anthem*: ’38 & ’46,” in this volume, p. 33–35.) Notice that, despite the ambiguity of “you,” Gaea’s modernized profession of love is at least as powerful and personal as the archaic version. The ambiguity of “you” doesn’t seem to cause the problems that *Anthem*’s “We” does. “You” is naturally assumed to denote a singular listener. (This is why dialects tend to evolve alternative second-person plurals, like “y’all,” “youse,” and “yins,” rather than second-person singulars.) I think this is because of a difference between the purposes of first- and second-person pronouns. The first-person pronoun allows the speaker to keep himself distinguished from others in his own thought. As I discuss later, this is a crucial need. Without maintaining such a perspective on oneself, thought would be impossible. The second-person pronoun respects the listener’s need to think of himself as distinct from all other men, and thus makes possible communication and co-operative thinking. Since people can only hear and evaluate speech as individuals, each listener can normally take the second-person pronoun to refer to himself individually. So, by speaking to a group in the second person, one respects *each listener’s* individual need to think of himself as distinct. Thus there is not a constant need for a distinction between singular and plural in the second person.

9. Rand presents her theory of concepts primarily as a solution to the Problem of Universals. The core of the theory is an original account of how men form universal concepts on the basis of knowledge of a handful of concrete instances. These universal concepts, denoted by words, serve the function of unit economy by allowing us to think in one unit (the concept) of an unlimited number of existents (the many referents).

10. I borrow this phrase from Allan Gotthelf, who uses it in “Ayn Rand on Concepts, Definitions, and Essences,” *Review of Metaphysics*, forthcoming.

11. Rand never wrote about the concept “I” from the perspective of her theory of concepts, but she did discuss it twice during a series of workshops on the theory conducted between 1969 and 1971. (The transcripts of these workshops are in the Ayn Rand Archives and portions of them have been published as an appendix to the expanded second edition of *ITOE*.) In the workshops she said that a pronoun is “the same form of concept as a noun but from a specific perspective.” Personal pronouns, she explained, denote men from specialized perspectives. “I” denotes a man, “as against all other men,” from his own perspective. Because a pronoun conceptualizes entities from a specialized perspective involving their relationship to the speaker, it “involves concepts of consciousness.” In a separate discussion from the workshops, Rand said “I,” “self,” and “consciousness” all denote the same fact (though, again, from different perspectives). In this same discussion she agrees to another participant’s claim that “I” refers to the whole man, not just to his consciousness. So her position seems to be that “I” refers to the man from his own perspective, i.e., as a conscious being aware of himself as distinct from other men.

12. Like all other concepts, pronouns are justified only when they aid in cognition by unit-economizing. Multiplying them beyond necessity would hamper cognition. When we distinguish between categories of things with different pronouns, the distinction becomes a constant feature of our thought. The distinctions we make with our pronouns mark the most important and pervasive distinctions in our thinking: one versus many, conscious versus inanimate, self versus others, male vs. female. (This last distinction acquires a special importance because of the significance of sex.)

13. Rand, *The Fountainhead*, 679.

14. David Harriman, ad., *Journals of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1997; paperback edition, Plume, 1999), 86.

15. Harriman, *Journals*, 80. Significantly, she blames this problem on the lack of “that little word ‘I’, which after centuries of Christianity’s efforts, has been erased from human consciousness, and along with it took everything that *was* human consciousness.”

16. The generalization that the loadstone always points north, as a rational scientist would hold it, is not contradicted by the discovery of the effects of electric current. (For discussion of a similar case, see Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* [New York: Dutton, 1991; paperback edition, New Meridian, 1993], 173ff.) The proper way of holding such generalization requires a self-conscious method that makes provisions for how one will deal with new evidence as it becomes available.

17. Peikoff, *Objectivism*, 198.

18. It may be possible, with effort, to maintain this perspective to some extent without the concept “I.” Clearly Prometheus does so, or else it would be impossible for him to do his scientific work. But, as we will see, there are limits to how much Prometheus can accomplish intellectually before he learns the concept.

19. Rand, *Fountainhead*, 679.

20. In note 11 I discussed the relationship between the concepts “I” and “consciousness.” “Consciousness” is one of three axiomatic concepts Rand discusses in *ITOE*. She writes that

although they designate a fundamental *metaphysical* fact, axiomatic concepts are the products of an *epistemological* need—the need of a volitional, conceptual consciousness which is capable of error and doubt. . . . It is only a man’s consciousness, a consciousness capable of conceptual errors that needs a special identification of the directly given. . . . Axiomatic concepts are epistemological guidelines. They sum up the existence of all human cognition: something *exists* of which I am *conscious*; I must discover its *identity*. (58–59)

The concept “I” also denotes a directly given metaphysical fact and it denotes it in the service of an epistemological need. It denotes oneself, *one’s own consciousness*, in a way that underscores its individuality and so facilitates self-direction.

21. Rand introduces the idea of stolen concepts in Galt’s Speech, from *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Random House, 1957; thirty-fifth anniversary paperback edition, Signet, 1992), 951–52. There are elaborations on this fallacy in Nathaniel Branden, “The Stolen Concept,” *Objectivist Newsletter*, January 1963, and in Peikoff, *Objectivism*, 136.

22. We know that metaphysical individualism is true in the same way that we know that consciousness exists. We can know that we are conscious and that human consciousness is self-directed by introspection, but what each of us knows by introspection is *his own* consciousness. We learn that other people and animals are conscious by observing their behaviors, but this too only gives us evidence of *individual* consciousnesses. Metaphysical individualism is self-evident and is presupposed by all concepts of consciousness.

23. Similarly, the fact that metaphysical individualism is self-evident does not mean that it is universally accepted or that there can be no confusion about it. Self-evident truths are contained implicitly in sense-perception, but thought is required to make them explicit and to remain true to them in one’s thinking. Mistaken or dishonest philosophical doctrines can hinder us from conceptualizing self-evidencies and prevent them from playing their proper role in our thought. A frequent theme in Rand’s writing is the way men deny or evade the self-evident facts of identity and causality. For example, in “Causality vs. Duty,” in *Philosophy: Who Needs It* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1982; paperback edition, Signet, 1984), she argues that the anti-concept “duty” obliterates “causality,” an axiomatic concept, from a man’s mind.

24. Ayn Rand, “Credibility and Polarization,” *The Ayn Rand Letter*, October 11, 1971, p. 1. Some anti-concepts are “stolen concepts,” others are “unnecessary and rationally unusable” for other reasons. Some

originate in mysticism; many are “package deals” which group things by nonessential resemblances, obscuring more significant differences.

25. It is questionable whether anti-conceptualization could actually be carried as far as it is in *Anthem*. Anti-concepts are parasitical on valid concepts. If they totally succeeded in destroying the valid concepts, they would lose all semblance of meaning. It is not clear that Rand intended the City’s language to be possible. In her journals Rand described the strike in *Atlas Shrugged* as a fantasy premise, an exaggeration of an actual phenomenon. (See Harriman, *Journals of Ayn Rand*, 398.) Similarly, I think, the City’s language is a fantastic exaggeration of the conceptual fallacies inherent in collectivism.

26. Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, 238. The comment is made by Rearden who, like Prometheus, has accepted and violated a false and vicious moral code.

27. Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, 931.

28. Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: New American Library, 1964), 22.

29. Rand, *Fountainhead*, 425.

30. In a sense, a man is conscious prior to choosing to focus, but in the distinctively human sense—the sense that gives rise to the need for the concept “I”—a man is not conscious until he focuses his mind. As Rand puts the point in “The Objectivist Ethics”:

When man unfocuses his mind, he may be said to be conscious in a subhuman sense of the word, since he experiences sensations and perceptions. But in the sense of the word applicable to man—in the sense of a consciousness which is aware of reality and able to deal with it, a consciousness able to direct the actions and provide for the survival of a human being—an unfocused mind is *not* conscious. (*The Virtue of Selfishness*, 22)

31. In “Philosophy and Sense of Life,” Rand discusses the process by which a man’s “subconscious mechanism sums up his psychological activities, integrating his conclusions, reactions or evasions into an emotional sum that establishes a habitual pattern and becomes his automatic response to the world around him” (Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature*, revised edition [New York: Signet, 1975], 26).

32. For further discussion of Prometheus’ “curse,” in relation to Rand’s view of volition and moral character, see Onkar Ghatge, “Breaking the Metaphysical Chains of Dictatorship,” 244.

33. In *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand defines happiness, for example, as “that state of consciousness which proceeds from the achievement of one’s values” (928).

34. “Saint” is a moral/aesthetic concept; it denotes a person conceived of as embodying a moral ideal. Rand discusses the need for concretizations of moral codes in “The Psycho-Epistemology of Art” (in *The Romantic Manifesto*). Jason Rheins has called my attention to a related discussion in “Art and Moral Treason” that sheds light on the role

of the Saint of the pyre in *Anthem*. There Rand discusses Romantic art as the means by which a child learns

the precondition and the incentive for the later understanding of [abstract] principles: the emotional experience of admiration for man's highest potential, the experience of looking up to a hero—a view of life motivated and dominated by values, a life in which man's choices are practicable, effective and crucially important—that is, a moral sense of life. (*Romantic Manifesto*, 146–47)

The Saint of the pyre plays a similar inspirational role for Prometheus at a key point in the story. In his second journal entry, Prometheus catches himself wondering about the lost words from the Umentionable Times and begs for the Council's forgiveness: "May the Council have mercy on us! . . . We shall not ask this question and we shall not think it. We shall not call death upon our head." It is in this context that he recounts the story of the Saint of the pyre, after which he writes: "What—even if we have to burn for it like the Saint of the pyre—what is the Unspeakable Word?" (51). It is the image of the Saint, Prometheus' early concretization of an individualistic morality, that inspires him to take this significant step towards conceptualizing that ideal and realizing it in his own life.

35. Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism Through Induction*, Lecture 4 (audio tapes, Second Renaissance Books, 1998).

36. That hunger indicates that a physical need is significant. It represents a step towards grasping objectivity. According to Objectivism, though a man's values are chosen, they have a factual basis in his survival requirements. The underscoring of hunger shows that Prometheus recognizes that there is a factual component to values.

37. The only other time Prometheus describes himself as proud is in discussing the way he accepts his Life Mandate (26). He uses the term also to describe the Saint of the pyre (51) and to describe Gaea's voice when she tells him that she followed him into the Forest (82). Later he associates it with the concept "I" (100).

38. All quotes in the following section are from lectures 3 and 4 of this series, except where otherwise indicated.

39. Rand, *Virtue of Selfishness*, 16

40. On this point see Onkar Ghate, "Breaking the Metaphysical Chains of Dictatorship," 228–29, 233–34.

41. Peikoff calls the sorts of values with which the thinker would begin "common sense values." They are things that the thinker can recognize as values and give some reason for, though he cannot yet philosophically validate them. Examples would include: food, shelter, clothing, friendship, strength, money, a job, knowledge, art. Because common sense values lack a full validation, it is possible that some of them will not be genuine values. But, if so, the thinker will find that they clash with the others and would ultimately be led to reject them.

42. Rand, *Virtue of Selfishness*, 27.

43. Rand, *Virtue of Selfishness*, 32.

44. Aristotle endorsed a moral standard much like the one Peikoff discusses. For further discussion of this sort of standard, including its relation to Rand's thought at different points in her development, see my "Aristotle as Ethicist" (audio tapes/CDs, The Ayn Rand Bookstore, 2003).

45. In the lectures Peikoff also stresses that when inducing a philosophical principle it is important to consider the principle in light of human history. As we have seen, Prometheus does in his final entry.

46. Gregory Salmieri and Allan Gotthelf, "Ayn Rand," *Dictionary of Modern American Philosophers* (London: Thoemmes, 2005).

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