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Honors Program Second Prize Essay

JAY: AN INTIMATE MARTYR OF OBJECTIVISM

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“At the dawn of our lives, we seek a noble vision of man’s nature and of life’s potential” (“Introduction”). According to Ayn Rand, Russian-American novelist and philosopher, Objectivism is that vision. This credo rests in the foundation that reality exists and one must discover its nature with an audacious approach of self-serving ambition. Although it has received a fair amount of following, praise, and success, Rand’s philosophy has also sourced the demise of many individuals through broken promises and mental pandemonium. The life and mental state of Jay, a broken man from the novel *Intimacy* by Hanif Kureishi, serves to thoroughly exemplify the philosophy’s imperfections and the reasoning behind one’s downfall on the path of Objectivism. Throughout the novel, his character development, or lack thereof, constitutes as the paradigm for an Objectivist breakdown. Jay’s thought process, intimately shared through a perspective that ostensibly caters to Rand’s ideology, leaves him in a hopeless abyss of indifference and monotonous strife towards the known unknown; he lives with the unsettling, subconscious belief that his purpose has expired. Jay is the epitome of the failures of Rand’s philosophy, a martyr of Objectivism.

Objectivist essentials most rudimentarily consist of reality and self-interest which ultimately derive reason. Rand explains, “If one recognizes the supremacy of reason and applies it consistently, all the rest follows.” Furthermore, the key goal of Rand’s philosophy is to embrace reason as an absolute. Objectivism, in Rand’s eyes, promotes the idea that recognition of reality and approach with selfish ambition is a sure-fire way to embrace this absolute. One must: “choose to face the facts at all times, in all areas, whether at work or at home, in business or in love . . . no matter what conclusion logically ensues, whether pleasant or unpleasant” (“Introduction”). Rand’s philosophy emphasizes that “reality is not to be rewritten or escaped, but, solemnly and proudly, faced” (“Introduction”) and further encourages that this reality be faced with refined and rational selfishness.

With the esteemed value of selfish motivation, Objectivism seemingly appears as an unorthodox approach to life. However, according to Rand’s *Virtue of Selfishness*:

The Objectivist ethics holds that the actor must always be the beneficiary of his action and that man must act for his own rational self-interest. But his right to do so is derived from his nature as man and from the function of moral values in human life — and, therefore, is applicable only in the context of a rational, objectively demonstrated and validated code of moral principles which define and determine his actual self-interest. It is not a license “to do as he pleases” and it is not applicable to the altruists’ image of a “selfish” brute nor to any man motivated by irrational emotions, feelings, urges, wishes or whims.

Selfishness, according to Rand’s re-established definition, is rooted in reason, opposed to self-centered whims. It is exemplified through hard work for a purposeful and productive life that aims to earn genuine self-esteem. Optimal success and human fulfillment is only reached with a foundation of reason and selfish ambition (in its noblest and most respected form). Ergo, therein Objectivism lies the key to unlocking the highest morality and satisfaction of existence.

Objectivism, through its suggested elevated reasoning, provides answers to various questions faced by

humanity. Stated on Aynrand.org:

Is the pursuit of profit a noble enterprise or the root of all evil? Is sexual passion an exalted spiritual virtue or a dirty, animalistic vice? Is reason an absolute or is faith an alternative source of truth? Is self-esteem possible or are we consigned to a life of self-doubt and guilt? In what kind of society can an individual prosper, and in what kind of society is he doomed to the opposite fate?

Objectivism promises answers to these questions with the simplicity of selfishness: self-profit, self-pleasure, self-reasoning, self-esteem. The self is the Objectivist's answer; the answer Jay is looking for. Many, alike Jay, view Rand's philosophy as a hopeful approach to life, believing that it has the potential to "[give] philosophic and esthetic expression to the uniquely American spirit of individualism, of self-reliance, of entrepreneurship, of free markets" (Brook). However, although Objectivism has been accredited with success stories of motivating rebirth and lifestyle realignment, it remains a topic of controversial debate. "With adoring fans, rabid critics and very few in between, why does *Atlas Shrugged* [among countless other Objectivist works] evoke such impassioned responses? Because it grapples with the fundamental problems of human existence — and presents radically new answers" ("Introduction").

Unfortunately, with radical change, just as the result of radical success, comes radical consequences. Jay, as previously mentioned, embodies the consequences of the promises broken by Objectivism. His life represents the potential downfall of following this movement, as Rand's perspective is not always able to amount to the fulfilling and perfected outcome it claims to guarantee. Jay's ultimate goals include finding purpose and living productively. He desires genuine self-esteem and true happiness, the kind that enables complete satisfaction. According to Objectivism, strife towards these goals follows a simple path of recognizing reality and approaching it with selfish intent. This philosophy argues, "man is an end in himself", and that is exactly the course Jay took.

As previously discussed, the first step of Objectivism is to embrace reality. Approaching life with reason is halfway to the ideal way of life. Jay does this by always analyzing his life with truth, or at least his perceived truth. This is the source of one of the main issues. Everyone has their own perspective, and therefore everyone has a different perception of truth or, in other words, a biased reality. No one holds the complete concept of reality for no one is without their own perspective. It is impossible for humans to remove themselves in a way that objectively observes the world in completeness. Yes, objectively viewing specific aspects can be achieved, however objective observation of the world in its entirety is inconceivable. Therefore, the Objectivist claim that reason is fully conceived cannot be true, thus furthermore there lies a major problem in the philosophy from which downfall can conspire.

Jay values reason as an absolute, however the Objectivist's failure to recognize the qualities of human perception leave Jay (anyone on such a path) in a state of mind that believes his own perspective is reality. This perspective enables lies to prosper as other's perspectives are shut out and ignored, ultimately resulting in loneliness. Failure to make compromises and learn from other's viewpoints is ultimately failure to live in reality; the Objectivist fails to abide by its ultimate value of reason. In summary, reality is recognizing that your perspective is not the only one observing the world and reason is realizing your perspective is not always reality. By extension, Objectivist's reason is not perfected reality. Jay puts too much value in what he can offer himself and not enough in what others can help him see, and therefore experiences isolation rather than the promise of fulfillment. Not one human being can truly be fulfilled alone. As Jay approaches life disconnected from others, he soon discovers his Objectivist viewpoint leaves him at a loss, his own essence cannot fulfill his existence.

In addition to reality and reason, the second step of ideally living by Objectivism is to embrace selfishness. The problem of Rand's selfishness lies in her idiosyncratic usage of the term. According to Rob Bass, "Selfishness does not mean "concern for oneself or what one wants or how one feels". Nor does it mean, as Rand defined it, "concern with one's own interests." The problem with these "definitions" is that they leave out an essential element that selfishness always involves "excessive concern with one's own interests or concern with one's

own interests to the exclusion or disregard of the interests of others”. Due to the confusing definitions tied to selfishness and the failure to recognize the link between selfishness and exclusion, many people approach Objectivism’s value of self-interest in the same way they approach reality: with ignorance towards others.

As self-interest promises to produce happiness, Jay embraces his selfish nature in search of satisfaction. This thought process is expressed through Jay’s Objectivist perspective found in an internally formulated response to a question asked by his friend:

Don’t you believe in anything? Or is virtue only a last resort for you? I might say: I believe in individualism, in sensualism, and in creative idleness. I like the human imagination: its delicacy, its brutal aggressive energy, its profundity, its power to transform the material world into art. I like what men and women make. I prefer this to everything else on earth, apart from love and women’s bodies, which are at the centre of everything worth living for.

Rand’s previously explained ideology of self-interest and selfishness takes form in Jay’s beliefs; everything important to him relates solely to himself, and by doing this he shuts everyone else out. Every value pursues his own selfish ends. Although Rand claims to have re-defined selfishness, its roots still revolve around the self, therefore, as previously noted, there is potential source for failure. Relying on selfishness to determine one’s actions and thoughts only separates a person further from others, thus further from reality, hence Objectivism (complete reliance on oneself) fails again.

To further diagnose self-interest’s downfall, Jay’s specific Objectivist values can be scrutinized. According to Jay’s wife, Susan, we live in an age of selfishness. Jay states, “She talks of a Thatcherism of the soul that imagines that people are not dependent on one another. In love, these days, it is a free market; browse and buy, pick and choose, rent and reject, as you like. There’s no sexual and social security; everyone has to take care of themselves, or not. Fulfillment, self-expression, and “creativity” are the only values” (Intimacy). However, as he soon discovers, these values cannot complete the foundation for one’s life, just as selfishness fails to create a fulfilling life. Objectivist Jay complies to the agenda of the Thatcherite soul.

Fulfillment, in Jay’s instance, involves love and women’s bodies. The Objectivist would say that, to a rational individual, love involves tremendous personal, selfish gain and sex is an expression of self-esteem and celebrated existence. However, as Jay experiences both sex and supposed love, he is left emptier than he began. He states, “I know love is dark work; you have to get your hands dirty. If you hold back, nothing interesting happens. At the same time, you have to find the right distance between people. Too close, and they overwhelm you; too far and they abandon you. How to hold them in the right relation?” (Intimacy). This dissatisfaction can easily be attributed to the Objectivist’s approach of self-interest. Love and sex involve two people, opposed to one. As previously stated, Jay picks and chooses love as he pleases with self-induced desire and therefore fails to truly experience his relationships. Objectivists see these relations as a “trade” that benefits both parties whereas these relations should be viewed through the lens of a shared experience. Jay is unable to experience fulfillment because he individualizes the experiences of love and sex.

Additionally, independent thinking and self-expression are also important Objectivist virtues that further isolate the objectivist from reality. Although both are positive ideals, sole reliance on independence leaves one feeling incomplete. As previously described, Thatcherite souls place no value on the dependence of others. Jay places so much value in his independent thoughts that he comes to a point where he is living in his head. His inability to share experience, emotion, and discovery with others plays a huge role in his demise. It is impossible to feel true fulfillment without sharing creativity with others and learning from other’s creativity. Often, in Jay’s case especially, the Objectivist believes they will feel empowered through individualism and sensualism. However, creativity, when idle, is a source of isolation.

“Man must choose his actions, values and goals,” she summarizes, “by the standard of that which is proper to man — in order to achieve, maintain, fulfill and enjoy that ultimate value, that end in itself, which is his own life.”

Jay's belief in objectivist values drives him to act in selfish ways, hoping they will leave him with a life of purpose, success, and fulfillment. Sadly, Objectivism's theory of self and oneself as the means to all ends has proven faulty, leaving its followers with inaccurate guidelines and broken promises. Jay's life exemplifies the downfall of reliance on self and proves the falsity in living by values connected solely to the self.

"A philosophy for living on earth," Ayn Rand called Objectivism, or rather a philosophy that creates an inner world of isolation. Jay exemplifies all the martyrs for the cause of Objectivism.