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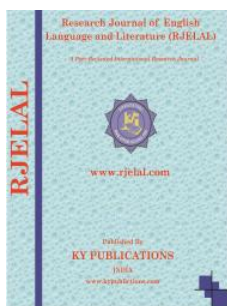
## THE EGOISM-ALTRUISM DEBATE: A STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO AYN RAND'S PHILOSOPHICAL IDEOLOGY

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### ABSTRACT

Ethics and philosophy form a vital role in the literature of the contemporary period primarily due to the questions that arise pertaining to that which is "right" and "wrong". Scholars and thinkers have time and again put forth their ideas of either self-sacrifice/altruism or self-centeredness/egoism as the deciding factor of one's actions. These two concepts are antonyms and cannot co-exist at the same time. Ayn Rand was a strong advocate of egoism and she shunned altruism in all of her writings. She was notoriously known for her controversial theory Objectivism which promotes the pursuit of one's own happiness in life. It was always Rand against the world. She either thought people stood with her or against her. The Ayn Rand Institute teaches the philosophy of Objectivism through extensive means. Her admirers believe it to be their guiding light whereas those who denounce her ideas deem it destructive. While some of Rand's ideas have changed lives for the better, it has undoubtedly made many other lives worse. Hence the fact that Objectivism is now called a cult does not come as a surprise. Rand promoted the extensive use of "I" and found nothing worthy of appreciation in the selfless word "we". Ayn Rand's definitions of rational egoism and her works that delineate on its magnificence have been of a tremendous influence on people mentally, intellectually and economically. Her ideas have shaken the nations and continue to do so to a greater degree in the present age.

**Keywords:** Egoism, rational, psychological, altruism, objectivism, philosophy

### INTRODUCTION

"Art is a selective re-creation of reality according to an artist's metaphysical value judgments." (Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto* 8). Right from childhood, Rand had decided to use her pen to spread her beliefs on the greatness of the individual mind and become famous as a result of it. Decades after her death, Objectivism still holds a strong place in the hearts of those who worship her.

"Selfishness is a profoundly philosophical, conceptual achievement" (Rand, *Philosophy: Who*

*Needs It* 68). It is the staunch belief in her ideals that has made Ayn Rand as one of the most daring literary figures in all of American history. Her controversial ideals have got her ardent admirers of the past and present alike. She did not like anything that threatened the individuality of mind. Rand made it clear in all of her writings that it is the supremacy of the mind that holds the chief place and the emotions, feelings and needs of others can never replace the former.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW:

Ayn Rand was not the only one who talked greatly of the need to be egoistic in a world that hails altruism. The German philosopher Max Stirner believed in the ascendancy of egoism and propagated his ideas in his work titled *The Ego and Its Own*. He gave a definition for hierarchy thus: "Hierarchy is dominion of thoughts, dominion of mind! We are hierarchic to this day, kept down by those who are supported by thoughts. Thoughts are the sacred" (Stirner 50).

Rand made her friend Leonard Peikoff as her intellectual heir. Just like his mentor, Peikoff was also against socialism because he believed that socialism goes against the concept of selfishness and proclaims the greatness of living a selfless life. Socialism, to the Objectivists, is an enemy to the individual mind as it provides no scope of living for one's own contentment.

#### MATERIAL AND METHODS:

The concepts of egoism and altruism are more complex than they actually seem. The major types of egoism are ethical and psychological. They look similar but they are at variance with each other. The fictional and non-fictional works of Rand elucidate on these aspects of egoism and altruism and why she believed that the latter is practically impossible in the real world.

#### Objectives of the study:

- 1) To highlight the ways in which egoism is glorified in Rand's writings
- 2) To demonstrate the various levels in which egoism is dealt with
- 3) To bring out Rand's beliefs as to why altruism is not possible and argue against it

#### DISCUSSION

**Ethical egoism:** "My philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute." (Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* 1074). According to Ayn Rand, the happiness of man

and his achievement in life is the morality that one should seek to accomplish.

The concept of "interest" is an important factor to deal in ethical egoism. Rand believed that one must forego all negative thoughts that seem to threaten the interests of man, especially the theories of being selfless in order to attain happiness. The topic of interest puts forth pertinent questions of ethics.

One of them deals with the dilemma whether he/she should concentrate on the short-term goals rather than the long-term ones, especially if they seem to be at odds with each other. Rand believed in attaining happiness out of fulfilling the desires in a rational way. However, her own life contradicted it. She was keen on pursuing happiness and had an extra-marital relationship hoping it would satisfy her. Rand's husband became an alcoholic and she herself suffered her later days exceedingly. It has been recorded that Rand had an unhappy, lonely death.

Ethical relativism believes that there are no absolute moral standards. Ethical egoism, a variant of ethical relativism, believes that morality is set by individuals. Rand was a living egoist and a proud one at that. According to Rand, "Morality is an abstract, conceptual code of values and principles." (Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto* 138).

The writer herself could not attain happiness after following her philosophy. The major essence of Objectivism and its credibility is shaken by the very fact that it proved to be a failure in Rand's life.

#### Psychological egoism and psychological altruism:

Ethical egoism is related to but different from psychological egoism. "Unlike ethical egoism, psychological egoism is merely an empirical claim about what kinds of motives we have, not what they ought to be." (May 1).

Psychological altruism holds that humans have feelings of altruism in them. The psychological egoist would believe that those feelings spring forth from feelings of egoism. This can be best understood from Ayn Rand's masterpiece, *Atlas Shrugged*.

James Taggart's young wife Cheryl married him because she believed him to be a real hero in a cruel world but later found out that he was one of the cruelest people ever to live on earth. His malice and self-righteousness disgusted her and at one point in time, she began to fear for her life. When she came running to Dagny, her husband's sister, she felt comforted. Dagny warned her to be safe and volunteered to help Cheryl. However, Cheryl later took her own life, much to the dismay of Dagny. For an egoist like Dagny to care about the ever-loving Cheryl without any expectations is not a normal event. According to the perspective of a psychological egoist, Dagny must have had altruistic feelings primarily because she did not want to end up feeling bad or there is a possibility that she wanted to feel good by having helped the poor woman.

It is quite impossible to regard the views of psychological egoists in this matter. Do people care for others because they have ulterior motives or do they save lives to make themselves feel great? These notions question the degree of kindness that is made manifest by those around us.

**Altruism:** Ayn Rand concluded that the morality of altruism is a "tribal phenomenon" (Rand, *Philosophy: Who Needs It* 69). According to Rand, the early men had to depend on each other for basic survival and for protection. This has been perpetuated into the modern society by those "self-arrested" men who are unable to survive without tribal leadership or "protection". They have "no sense of self or of personal value." (Rand, *Philosophy: Who Needs It* 69).

Anthropology reveals that people, from the ancient times till date, have been better off by living together and striving for one another's benefit. It has been scientifically proven that humans work best in a cooperative society where people work together as a single unit rather than being divided amongst themselves as individual units.

The field of commerce, for instance, can only work efficiently by the services of others and the concept of one man's army is practically contrary to reason. However intelligent a person might proclaim to be, he/she needs a team and is

dependent on others to distribute and share the products to gain recognition in the society.

#### CONCLUSION

The stories of how staunch believers in Objectivism, such as Alan Greenspan, later became aware of the dangerous notions it holds are retold in history for the sake of emphasis and understanding. Though Rand was a genius in putting forth such a theory, it has proven to be destructive to the society, economy and to the individual minds as well. To quote the research psychologist Denise Cummins, "The annals of history show that even if one is talented enough to create enormous wealth, monopolizing that wealth for oneself is a dangerous course of action." (1).

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