

Article

Teaching Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* at the Christian University¹

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McCormick seeks to help the reader understand "Atlas Shrugged" in a Christian cultural context, contrast the novel's objectivistic philosophy with that of Christianity, and contrast the business activities seen in the novel with Christian business prescriptions.

Abstract

Ayn Rand is one of the most successful and influential fiction writers of the 20th century. Her novel *Atlas Shrugged* is considered her most important work and is widely read in business circles. This article seeks to help the reader understand Rand's novel in a Christian cultural context. Rand's philosophy of objectivism is contrasted with Christian teaching, and several business activities from the novel are highlighted and contrasted with traditional Christian business prescriptions.

Teaching *Atlas Shrugged* at the Christian University

Ayn Rand was one of the most influential authors of the 20th century. Her epochal 1957

novel *Atlas Shrugged*² is considered by many to be her masterpiece and continues to sell thousands of copies each year, more than two decades after her death in 1982. *Atlas Shrugged* is virtually unique in literature for its positive depiction of business leaders and the role of business in society. Whereas most widely known literary works portray business leaders as oppressive, conniving, or hollow (e.g., John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, or Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt*, respectively), *Atlas Shrugged* portrays business leaders as heroic beings who are central to the quality of life of any society. Not surprisingly, Rand's work has been well received and widely read in business circles because of this.

In 1991, the Library of Congress conducted a survey of 778 Americans, asking them to name a book that had made a difference in their lives.³ The number one book listed was the Bible — not surprising in an historically Judeo-Christian nation like the United States of America. The number two book, however, was *Atlas Shrugged*. Additionally, *Atlas Shrugged* was also named to the New York Public Library’s list of 100 “Books of the Century”⁴ and placed first in the Modern Library’s Reader’s Poll of best novels published in the English language since 1900⁵ — besting such critically praised works as Harper Lee’s *To Kill A Mockingbird* (#4), J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (#5), and James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (#11). The introduction to the latest printing of the novel claims that everything Rand wrote during her lifetime is still in print, selling several hundred thousand units per year and upwards of 20 million in total thus far.

How did *Atlas Shrugged* achieve and maintain such widespread popularity? For starters, it’s an entertaining and interesting read due to Rand’s admiration of the Romantic literary movement and the

American detective novel. When I use the book in class, my students often groan at the novel’s 1,000-plus pages, but the vast majority of them read it, and some even ask for more. This is a rare occurrence for 1,000-plus page novels in the modern university. An additional reason for her popularity is that Rand was a competent and intentional propagandist. In one of her personal letters, Rand stated with characteristic bravado, “I’m the chief living writer of propaganda fiction, I think — at least I think I’m the only one who knows how to do it properly ...”⁶ Her propagandist intentions result in a dramatic novel populated with larger-than-life caricatures that the reader will either love or hate. In the end, the novel quickly grabs the reader’s interest and keeps him or her turning the pages as more and more information is added to an ever-developing plot.

A final reason that *Atlas Shrugged* has achieved high levels of popularity is that Rand created institutions to perpetuate and increase the novel’s influence. Rand saw herself as a philosopher, although her popular legacy today is that of a novelist. That is, the vast majority of people are introduced to her philosophical

ideas by way of her fiction. Nevertheless, she clearly outlined a school of philosophical thought known as objectivism early in her career and embedded it in her popular writings. *Atlas Shrugged* is believed to be the fullest artistic expression of her objectivist ideals. After Rand's death in 1982, the Ayn Rand Institute in Santa Monica, California, became the primary vehicle for spreading her philosophy with *Atlas Shrugged* as the primary vehicle for introducing her philosophy to college students and business professionals. Each year, the Ayn Rand Institute (www.aynrand.org) conducts a variety of educational seminars, debates, and essay contests for high school and college students.

Recently, objectivism has begun to make more visible inroads into business schools and the Academy of Management. Rand has recently been cited as a credible source of management and organizational thought in several articles in prestigious management journals and continues to be promoted within the Academy of Management by a number of scholars.⁷ Though happening in tandem with a growing interest in spirituality and religion within the Academy,

Rand's rising legitimacy as a source of management thought is worth noting. This rising legitimacy suggests that Rand's novels will continue to sell well, her work will continue to be cited, and her influence will continue to grow within the Academy of Management and other areas of the business academy as well.

This article is written to provide professors a framework for teaching *Atlas Shrugged* at Christian universities. Rand's novels are wonderful texts to use at faith-informed business schools due to Rand's contention that faith in God has no place whatsoever in the world of business. In fact, she rather derogatorily labeled any sort of faith-informed thought or activity as "irrationalism" or "mysticism." Most certainly, there are other management theorists and philosophers that are silent or antagonistic to the idea of God. However, Rand and her followers have been particularly ardent in their attack upon faith-informed perspectives — as the reader of the novel will quickly discover.

This article is written from the perspective of a Christian scholar⁸ and does not attempt a complete critique of Rand's philosophy of objectivism.

Rather, my wish is to accurately portray Rand's ideas in her own words while at the same time clarifying and expanding the narrow Christian characterizations that populate her novel. For the interested reader, objectivism as a philosophy has been thoroughly critiqued by both explicitly Christian scholars and otherwise.⁹ This article has three sections. First, I wish to help the reader understand Rand's novel in a Christian cultural context. Second, I wish to contrast Rand's philosophy of objectivism with some basic Christian teachings. Finally, I wish to highlight several managerial activities from the novel and contrast them with traditional Christian prescriptions.

Rand in the Christian Context

Rand's attacks on religion are inclusive of all faith traditions and are particularly sharp against the Christian tradition in *Atlas Shrugged*. The Christian tradition is explicitly called into question as early as the fourth page of the book. Later in the novel, during a time of national crisis, Christianity is portrayed as a desperate last resort as the country hurtles toward oblivion:

People with pleading eyes and desperate faces crowded into

tents where evangelists cried in triumphant gloating that man was unable to cope with nature, that his science was a fraud, that his mind was a failure, that he was reaping punishment for the sin of pride, for his confidence in his own intellect — and that only faith in the power of mystic secrets could protect him from the fissure of a rail or from the blowout of the last tire on his last truck. Love was the key to the mystic secrets, they cried, love and selfless sacrifice to the needs of others (p. 463).

At other places in the novel, her character Francisco d'Anconia argues against the Apostle Paul's well-known Christian teaching "For the love of money is the root of all evil" (I Timothy 6:10). Still later, her character John Galt goes to great lengths to condemn the Christian doctrine of original sin. In the final sentence of the book, Galt raises his hand to bless a new world with the sign of the dollar as opposed to the traditional Christian sign of the cross. In fact, Galt's parallels to Jesus are so frequent that Rand critic John W. Robbins contends in his book *Without A Prayer* that Rand deliberately constructed

Galt as a messianic figure to both effectively counter the Christian worldview while at the same time exploiting its powerful narrative.

Rand is not the first person to call Christianity into question, and she certainly will not be the last. Christianity has been called into question by critics wielding both more coercive power than Rand (such as the Roman Empire) and by critics with more complete philosophical alternatives (such as Friedrich Nietzsche).

Rand is, however, a notable presence at the moment and

should be understood in her own context and how that context shaped and motivated her writings.

Ayn Rand was born into a culturally Jewish family as Alissa Rosenbaum on February 2, 1905 in St. Petersburg, Russia. After the Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917, the Rosenbaum family business was nationalized. The family later fled to the Crimea, where the young Alissa would complete high school. When the Crimea also fell to the Bolsheviks, the Rosenbaums returned, and Alissa enrolled in the University of Leningrad

and also attended a year of film school. In 1926, Alissa immigrated to the United States under the guise of a visit to relatives in Chicago. She took the name Ayn Rand and moved to Hollywood almost immediately to become a scriptwriter and begin her literary career.

An awareness of Rand's Russian origins is particularly important in understanding her work and her opposition to Christianity in particular. Having

witnessed her family's unnecessary and intense suffering following the Bolshevik Revolution, she adopted strong anti-collectivist sentiments

that remained with her throughout her life. Researchers have amply documented the horrors of life in the emerging Communist regime should any readers doubt the horrors that Rand might have witnessed.¹⁰ Similarly, Rand grew up in the cultural context of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Most likely, this contributed to her rather one-dimensional portrayals of Christians (and other faith-centered individuals) as non-rational "mystics." A small amount of church history will help clarify this point.

In 1054 A.D., a great split occurred in the Christian church



Rand reacted ... by choosing to become an atheist.

between what is now the Holy Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. A variety of issues contributed to the split, but one of the main criticisms from the Eastern churches was that the Western (or Roman) churches were becoming too rational. The Roman Catholic Church confirmed this assessment by going on to produce one of the great defenders of rational thought, St. Thomas Aquinas, two centuries later.

Nearly a millennium after the split, the Eastern Orthodox Church still claims to be the one true church of Christ. In fact, Orthodox thinkers continue to debate the spiritual status of both Roman Catholics and Protestants, and a few actually consider them to be heretics. Following the Great Schism of 1054, the Eastern Orthodox Church became ever more committed to its mystical core and remains so to this day. As such, if Christianity could be thought of as a continuum ranging from non-mystical to mystical, the Eastern Orthodox Church would serve to anchor the mystical end of the scale. As a result, Rand's earliest experiences with religion — Russian Orthodoxy — were heavily

skewed toward mysticism and away from rationalism.

Rand reacted to the mysticism of the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Bolshevik Revolution by choosing to become an atheist. Biographers note that she adopted atheism in 1918 just prior to turning 14.¹¹ At that time, the young Rand — having seriously considered the question — noted in her diary, “Today, I decided that I am an atheist.” Although she may have experienced the full impact of the emerging Communist experience, whatever experience she may have had with the Eastern Orthodox Church gave her only a narrow slice of the full spectrum of Christian thought and practice.

Objectivist Philosophy and Christian Teaching

In 1974, Rand gave a commencement speech at West Point titled “Philosophy: Who Needs It?” In this speech she stated, “... the choice we make is not whether to have a philosophy, but which one to have: rational, conscious, and therefore practical; or contradictory, unidentified, and therefore lethal.” Similar to Rand, I believe that if we are going to talk about Christianity and how

Christianity matters in the marketplace, we should do so as clearly as possible with our students. Furthermore, if we are to challenge business students to think about how their faith matters in the marketplace, it's beneficial to do so in direct contrast to other paradigms that do not include faith but claim to be more effective because of this absence — paradigms such as Rand's. Whereas others have argued for Christian business models,¹² none have done so in direct contrast to Rand's increasingly popular framework. This section is written in broad strokes, and each contrasting point could very easily be expanded into several pages. My goal is to quickly capture the main differences between the two worldviews and credibly document their sources, leaving specific examples in the hands of the teacher working with the novel.

In the sections that follow, objectivist philosophy and Christian teaching are briefly contrasted with one another. I write from the perspective of a Protestant with an Arminian heritage and find objectivism and Christianity to share a surprising amount of common ground. Each places great importance on both

reason (Rand rooted in Aristotle, Christianity rooted in Thomas Aquinas) and the primacy of the individual (Rand, again, drawing upon Aristotle, and Protestant Christianity drawing upon Martin Luther). In addition, Christianity and objectivism both contend that all cooperation is ultimately voluntary — that is, you can't coerce people into doing the essential acts of giving effort, generating breakthrough ideas, or pursuing salvation. Furthermore, I'm not the only Protestant writer to find common ground between the two systems. Philosopher and objectivist critic John W. Robbins agrees with many of Rand's positions including "her praise of purpose and productive work, her condemnation of laziness, her enthusiasm for private property, her advocacy of *laissez-faire* capitalism and limited government, her attacks on altruism, her support of egoism, and her vigorous defense of logic."¹³ Although these similarities are noted here, the differences will serve to frame the classroom discussion. In contrast to Robbins' work, other Christian thinkers contend that Christianity makes no endorsement whatsoever of particular economic systems.¹⁴

So just what is objectivism? Ayn Rand once stated, “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.” These four phrases neatly sum up her philosophy and provide the basic outline for the framework I use to teach her novel.

***Objectivist Philosophy:
Man as a Heroic Being;
Christian Teaching: Man as a
Fallen yet Beloved Creation***

Rand advocated the ideal of a self-sufficient humanity beyond the primitive idea of God and subject to no limitations other than that of what she called “objective reality,” or, to specifically use her word, “existence.” Rand’s humanity is not a random branch on the Darwinian tree of life but, rather, a unique being on a unique trajectory whose origins just happen to be unknown or unknowable. Clearly, however, Rand believes humankind to be a product of nature.

In her novel, Rand neatly categorizes humanity into three groups she labels “giants of

Table 1

Framing *Atlas Shrugged* for Classroom Discussion

Objectivistic Philosophy	Christian Teaching
Man as a heroic being	Man as a fallen yet beloved creation
Happiness as man’s moral purpose	Obligation to community
Productive achievement as man’s noblest activity	Work as a blessing; Sabbath rest
Reason as man’s only absolute	Love as humankind’s only absolute

productive energy,” people of “moral integrity,” and “whining rotters.” A short dialogue between two characters (Francisco d’Anconia and Hank Rearden) from the novel captures and clearly differentiates among the three groups.

“When you felt proud of the rail of the John Galt Line,” said Francisco, the measured rhythm of his voice giving a ruthless clarity to his words, “what sort of men did you think of? Did you want to see that Line used by your equals — by giants of productive energy, such as Ellis Wyatt, whom it would help to reach higher and still higher achievement of their own?”

“Yes,” said Rearden eagerly.

“Did you want to see it used by men who could not equal the power of your mind, but who would equal your moral integrity — men such as Eddie Willers — who could never invent your Metal, but who would do their best, work as hard as you did, live by their own effort, and — riding on your rail — give a moment’s silent thanks to the man who gave them more than they could give him?”

“Yes,” said Rearden gently.

“Did you want to see it used by whining rotters who never

rouse themselves to any effort, who do not possess the ability of a filing clerk, but demand the income of a company president, who drift from failure to failure and expect you to pay their bills, who hold their wishing as an equivalent of your work and their need as a higher claim to reward than your effort, who demand that you serve them, who demand that it be the aim of your life to serve them, who demand that your strength be the voiceless, rightless, unpaid, unrewarded slave of their impotence, who proclaim that you are born to serfdom by reason of your genius, while they are born to rule by the grace of incompetence, that yours is only to give, but theirs only to take, that yours is to produce, but theirs is to consume, that you are not to be paid, neither in matter nor in spirit, neither by wealth nor by recognition nor by respect nor by gratitude — so that they would ride on your rail and sneer at you and curse you, since they owe you nothing, not even the effort of taking off their hats which you paid for? Would this be what you wanted? Would you feel proud of it?”

“I’d blast that rail first,” said Rearden, his lips white.

“Then why don’t you do it, Mr. Rearden? Of the three kinds

of men I described — which men are being destroyed and which are using your line today?” (pp. 421-422)

Rand’s “giants of productive energy” or “men of the mind” (as she more commonly refers to them) are heroic characters who embody the greatest ideals of both the Romantic literary movement and objectivist philosophy. Dagny Taggart, Hank Rearden, John Galt, and the others are larger-than-life characters that act out of a position of strength and seem immune to tragedy and suffering. Philosophically, Rand advocates this same heroism and basically denies that suffering exists. For her, a worldview (like Christianity) that embraces tragedy and suffering as inevitable is not only deeply flawed but morally wrong.

Christianity teaches that man is a created being who has fallen away from his Creator and is in need of reconciliation. In his *Confessions*, Augustine neatly captured this sentiment with the phrase “Thou hast created us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.” Christianity also teaches that among men “There is no difference, for all have sinned

and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:22b-24). As such, we are in a position of weakness, rather than one of strength as Rand proposes. Christians most certainly acknowledge that differences in ability and motivation exist among humans, but this is not the primary differentiator that it is for Rand. Rather, the starting place for Christians is our sinfulness before God as well as our status as a beloved creation.

***Objectivist Philosophy:
Happiness as Man’s Moral
Purpose; Christian Theology:
Obligation to Community***

Rand’s ideal man, John Galt of *Atlas Shrugged*, was an end in himself and lived by the words, “I swear — by my life and my love of it — that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine.” Rand modernizes the Aristotelian ideal of pursuing one’s own happiness as one’s moral purpose in life, and her philosophy is highly individualistic as a result. Her extreme views are best captured in the title of her 1964 philosophical work *The Virtue of Selfishness*. In brief, gifted

individuals exist to maximize only their own happiness.

In contrast to objectivism, Christianity teaches that gifted individuals are not ends unto themselves. Rather, Christianity teaches that God is the giver of gifts and that gifted individuals have an obligation to the greater community along with their gifts.¹⁵ I often ask my students as I teach this book, “To whom are you obligated?” Although the list often begins with close friends, it ultimately turns toward parents (and other ancestors) and the greater society from which the students have benefited socially, economically, or educationally.

Arguably, the novel’s most famous line is the query, “Who is John Galt?” In contrast, I like to ask, “Who is John Galt’s mother?” since she is never mentioned in the pages of the novel. Galt seems to have emerged full-grown, much like Athena birthed fully formed from the head of Zeus. Objectivism rejects any demand made upon the individual by the community and strongly condemns the notion of altruism. Christianity, in contrast, contends that if one is to choose to live in a state of community, then one must learn to embrace the idea of altruism and the suffering that will often

accompany it. In other words, personal happiness is not the penultimate Christian calling. In class I often point to the conspicuous absence of children from the novel and question how objectivism reconciles the sacrifice of being a parent with always pursuing individual happiness. Most adults find parenthood to be quite a reality check, as it’s the first time they interact on a regular basis with someone who is more selfish than themselves.

Trinitarian theology also provides a moral ideal to guide actions of Christians. The Trinitarian God of Christianity is one God composed of three individual yet interrelated beings: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The concept of a Trinitarian God suggests that we are never more actualized than when we are in relationship with one another.¹⁶ Furthermore, the true nature of our being may exist at the community level even though we do not necessarily have to sacrifice our individuality. Trinitarian theology suggests that we only truly know ourselves in relation to others just as the Trinity is a constant state of interrelatedness.

***Objectivist Philosophy:
Productive Achievement as
Man’s Noblest Activity;
Christian Teaching: Work as a
Blessing; Sabbath Rest***

Rand’s view of work is evident in the busy, productive lifestyles of her protagonists as they go about building railroads, pouring metal, and starting business ventures. It’s most clearly articulated by

... personal happiness is not the penultimate Christian calling.

the character of Francisco d’Anconia when he states, “[T]here’s nothing of any importance in life — except how well you do your work. Nothing. Only that. Whatever else you are will come from that. The code of competence is the only system of morality that’s on a gold standard. When you grow up, you’ll know what I mean” (p. 98).

One of the great misconceptions of modern Christianity is that work is viewed as part of the curse put upon the world after the Fall. However, a careful reading of the creation account in the book of Genesis suggests that God blessed humankind with work (Genesis 2:15) well before work was cursed after the Fall (Genesis 3:17-19). In addition, Christian

theology also informs us about the nature of God and that God is a worker (Genesis 1:1 and 2:2) who has been at work in His creation since the beginning. Jesus was also a worker who called people by their work (e.g., “fishers of men”), blessed people’s work, and taught

effectively using work parables (e.g., parable of the sower).

Theologically,

this suggests that work is in the very fabric of our being as a creation.¹⁷

The Christian God is a God who works, but He is also a God who rests (Genesis 2:2-3) and a God who invites His creation to partake of this part of His nature through Sabbath rest (Exodus 20:8, Hebrews 4:11). As such, Christianity embraces work and productive achievement in the objectivist sense and also embraces Sabbath rest. Christian writers teach a broad Sabbath concept as a spiritual discipline that helps remind Christians of their continual dependence upon God and their inability to completely control their own futures only through productive achievement.¹⁸ In addition, Christian philosophers like

Josef Pieper¹⁹ contend that rest and leisure are essential cultural activities which allow members of a society the chance to be present for the inspiration that leads to creativity.

Objectivist Philosophy: Reason as Man's Only Absolute; Christian Teaching: Love as Humankind's Only Absolute

Rand's philosophical hero is Aristotle, and she definitely promotes his WYSIWYG worldview — what you see is what you get. Reality, in other words, is knowable by humankind and there are no supernatural or transcendent realms of being like there were in Plato's philosophy or in Christian theology. Objectivism promotes the notion that reason is the only tool you need to navigate your world, with the cornerstone being Aristotle's concept of logical non-contradiction.

Christianity, in contrast, suggests that faith is indispensable. Christianity begins at the phrase "I believe ..." and presupposes a world of mystery rather than logical certainty. From an epistemological standpoint, Christianity also suggests that some knowledge is *revealed* knowledge and could never be known or established by reason

alone. Theology advocates the idea of human finitude. We are finite, created beings who know only in part and may one day know in full. Reason and intelligence are indispensable gifts for survival given to humans and should be promoted as such to all. However, faith is also indispensable.

Despite the centrality of faith to the Christian worldview, Christian teaching breaks through the traditional Randian "either-or" choice of either reason or faith and offers love as humankind's only absolute. The apostle Paul notes the superiority of love in his writings on faith, hope, and love in the first letter to the Corinthian church. Among the three, Paul notes, "... the greatest of these is love" (I Corinthians 13:13). The Apostle John teaches the supremacy of love in a number of his writings, but most succinctly in I John 4:8 in which he states simply that "God is love." Thus, whereas objectivists believe one cannot go wrong with reason as a guide for action, Christians believe that one cannot go wrong with love as a guide for action. However, just as objectivists might disagree as to the reasonable thing to do, Christians might disagree as to the loving thing to do.

Table 2

Practical Implications of Objectivism and Christianity

Objectivistic Practice	Christian Practice
The Strike (Radical Withdrawal Motivated by Objective Justice)	The Incarnation (Radical Involvement Motivated by Divine Mercy)
Purpose and Certainty	Vocation and Grace

So What? *Atlas Shrugged* and Christianity in Practice

Rand was deeply concerned with the practical consequences of her philosophy. Likewise, I want my students to understand how Christian beliefs impact behavior in the marketplace. Objectivist philosophy and Christian teaching will converge on many prescriptive actions. For example, both objectivism and Christianity speak out strongly against lying and advocate truth in all communications. This final section discusses two prescriptive situations in which objectivism and Christianity offer radically different prescriptive actions for business practitioners (see Table 2).

Objectivist Practice: The Strike (Radical Withdrawal Motivated by Objective Justice);

Christian Practice: The Incarnation (Radical Involvement Motivated by Divine Mercy)

At the very heart of *Atlas Shrugged* is the concept of the strike. Rand wrote her novel, in part, as a response to the labor movement of the 1940s and 1950s. Organized labor promoted the idea that labor was the engine that moved the world, and if labor went on strike, things would grind to a halt. Obviously, Rand rejected this idea and believed that the businesspeople and entrepreneurs of the world were the true prime movers.

Rand’s working title for *Atlas Shrugged* was “The Strike,” and it better conveys the key idea of the novel. The heart of the novel is an organized strike among the most gifted businesspeople of America in which they stop

working and watch America grind to a halt in their absence. The final title is also deeply symbolic of a strike where Atlas, the classical Titan who held the world upon his shoulders, decides to stop carrying the world, thereby shrugging. Atlas shrugging is symbolic of the business heroes quitting their productive work and bringing the world to a standstill. Rand's heroes do indeed bring the world to a halt and prepare to reenter the world as victors and masters on the last page of the novel.

The purpose of the strike in *Atlas Shrugged* is to make the world realize its dependence upon the people of ability — or “men of the mind,” as Rand often refers to them. Rand's hero, John Galt, realizes that the “looters” (i.e., those who take from you by force) and “moochers” (i.e., those who take from you by tears) will continue to exploit the people of ability — giving almost nothing in return — and will not be open to reasonable persuasion. Thus, the only solution is to withdraw, let the world crumble down upon the looters and moochers, and then return to the devastated world on your own terms. Specifically, those terms appear to be that the less able serve the

more able out of respect for their ability with any revolt being met with another strike. In brief, Rand's ideal world appears to be one where the weaker serve the stronger in grateful obedience.

Rand intentionally portrays Galt as a “man of justice” (p. 409) who is motivated by objective justice to organize a strike among the productive people of the world. In Rand's novel, justice exists when one enjoys the full benefit of one's productive efforts. If the gains from one's productive efforts are forcibly taken through taxes, blackmail, or any other forms of coercion, the only way to secure justice is to stop producing altogether. When Galt concludes he is the victim of injustice (i.e., others are consuming what he is producing), he chooses to strike. Given Galt's commitment to objective justice, his goal is to keep others from consuming more than they are either producing or paying money for. As a result, he goes on strike, stopping his productive activity altogether and, by effect, halting the uninvited consumption of others. In addition, he persuades other high ability people to strike with him. Given the situation, withdrawal — radical withdrawal — was the only alternative.

Rand's commitment to objective justice extends beyond personal decisions and into social culture, as illustrated in the objectivist utopia of Atlantis, a secret community where the heroic strikers in the novel reside. No friendly favors seem to be allowed, as even the smallest gesture (e.g., dropping a friend off on the way to somewhere else) must be compensated. A judge resides in Atlantis to resolve any disagreement that might emerge among the rational, self-interested residents — but he had not yet been called into duty. Of later interest in this section, one word is explicitly forbidden in Atlantis: Give.

By contrast, the story of Christianity is a story of intervention. Specifically, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ stands in direct contrast to the idea of the strike proposed by Rand. Whereas a strike can be characterized as “radical withdrawal,” the Incarnation can be characterized as “radical involvement.” Christianity teaches that God has always taken the historical initiative — in the Incarnation and other acts — to reach out to His beloved creation, and He continues to do so today.

Implicitly, this suggests that change does not begin with the withdrawal of the prime mover, but begins with the God who has continually taken the initiative to involve Himself in His own creation.

Like objectivists, Christianity values justice and working to achieve justice in this life. Furthermore, Christianity believes that life is full of injurious experiences that could result in an unjust situation. Christians and objectivists would agree that as victims of injustice our response to injustice will often promote either more injustice or more justice. However, Christians have two alternatives that are not allowable for objectivists — mercy and compassion. For simplicity of comparison, I'll define “mercy” as not getting punished when objectivist-style justice demands punishment. Likewise, I'll define “compassion” as being rewarded when objectivist-style justice demands that you should not be rewarded.

In full awareness of the grace he or she has received, the Christian should be more willing to share the gains of production more generously and with a broader group of constituents than the objectivist. This is not to say

that the objectivist would not pay his or her workers fairly. I'm certain that an objectivist would gladly exchange value for value with any able, motivated worker. The difference would most likely be most noticeable in how the surplus was distributed. Especially at the personal rather than the organizational level, Christians would favor philanthropic activity (known historically to Christians as alms-giving) whereas objectivists would not, as demonstrated by this section from the novel:

[Dagny Taggart] *"Did I understand you to say that Mr. Mulligan — who's worth about two hundred million dollars, I believe — is going to charge you twenty-five cents for the use of his car?"*

[John Galt] *"That's right."*

[Dagny Taggart] *"Good heavens, couldn't he give it to you as a courtesy?"*

He [Galt] sat looking at her for a moment, studying her face, as if deliberately letting her see the amusement in his. "Miss Taggart," he said, "we have no laws in this valley, no rules, no formal organization of any kind. We come here because we want to rest. But we have certain customs,

which we all observe, because they pertain to the things we need to rest from. So I'll warn you now that there is one word which is

Extending mercy is also a concept that objectivists could never endorse.

forbidden in this valley: the word 'give.'"

Such extreme stances are difficult to reconcile with historical examples such as that of Milton Hershey, who during the Depression provided the workers in his chocolate company with free medical care and also paid off the mortgages of every church in town with profits from his company. Objectivists would also object to Advent Industries, started by John D. Beckett of the R.W. Beckett Corporation, the nation's largest manufacturer of residential oil burners. Advent Industries was started as a subcontractor to the R.W. Beckett Corporation, and its sole purpose was to provide jobs for people who were in need of proving themselves reliable employees.²⁰ The workers employed by Advent were former prisoners, former substance abusers, and other

people who needed to signal to the marketplace that they were now reliable workers. Through the company, dozens of Advent alumni have returned to full-time jobs in the marketplace that once rejected them.

Extending mercy is also a concept that objectivists could never endorse. In disciplinary situations, objectivism would demand natural (or market) consequences followed by radical separation should the offender show any sign of trying to live off the goodwill of the objectivist manager. A Christian manager, in contrast, motivated by the mercy he has already received, would be willing to engage the offender — while not endorsing the offense — in the hope of achieving spiritual and personal transformation.

In the end, objectivism teaches that you cannot attempt to reform the “looter” by engaging with him. Christianity, by contrast, is open to engaging other people, both just and unjust, in hopes of transforming them. Key to this engagement is the Christian’s willingness to suffer and even die at the hands of the unjust in hopes of helping them realize their own depravity. In modern times, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. exemplified this

sort of Christian commitment and transformed a generation of individuals by moving man’s inhumanity to man from behind closed doors to the front pages of newspapers. Such personal sacrifice is condemnable on objectivist terms. Rand’s only solution for such a case is to withdraw your support until the looter realizes his dependence upon your superiority. Over and over again, Galt counsels his friends to not try to change the looters but to leave them alone.

***Objectivist Practice:
Purpose and Certainty;
Christian Practice:
Vocation and Grace***

The theme of purposeful activity abounds in *Atlas Shrugged*. Rand consistently portrays her heroes as acting “intentionally” or “deliberately” and often with “certainty.” The primacy of purposeful motivation in the novel is best captured in this brief exchange between two of the main characters from the novel (p. 98):

[Dagny] “*Francisco, what’s the most depraved type of human being?*”

[Francisco] “*The man without a purpose.*”

In objectivism, all purposes come from within the individual, and motive power is everything. Objectivism considers the abandonment of purpose (and, by implication, choice) complete depravity. Purposeful activity reaches its zenith in *Atlas Shrugged* in the organization of the strike by John Galt. Galt moves with complete certainty with no gap existing between what he expects to happen and the reality that exists. He correctly identifies all “men of the mind” and persuades them to join his strike — a remarkable feat of intelligence and centralized coordination. As a result, the motor of the world is stopped, and the strikers later reenter society on their own terms.

Whereas objectivism is characterized by purpose and certainty, Christianity is characterized by vocation and grace. Objectivist purpose arises from within the person. Christian vocation, by contrast, arises from both inside people as they become aware of their talents and from outside people as the needs of the community awaken latent talents within them. In recent times, Michael Novak has written most extensively about the possibility of business as vocation or calling.²¹ Although

Christianity embraces the idea of purposeful activity, it does so in a very different way than objectivism. Christians believe that humans possess a will that allows them to undertake purposeful activity. Sin arises when this will is consciously put to use pursuing activities contrary to God’s will. Such misuse of the will serves as the foundation of the Christian doctrine of sin — a concept completely rejected by Rand and her followers.

The objectivist certainty portrayed in *Atlas Shrugged* claims complete control of the world at all times. There are no surprises, because everything can be foreseen as natural consequences occurring in a perfectly knowable objective reality. Christianity, by contrast, portrays humans as finite creations who can never know reality with absolute certainty — thus the necessity of faith in our worldview. Christianity also allows for the popular concept of “emergence” via its notion of grace. The Christian lives in a grace-filled creation. God is continually reaching out to help His creation, and the task of the Christian is to recognize and respond to this grace. As such, a person can be both finite in his or her ability and purposeful in

his or her activity and still acknowledge a dependence upon grace for survival.

In his final work, Nobel laureate Friedrich Hayek²² suggested that a commitment to the superiority of reason — the foundation of objectivism — is also at the foundation of socialism and ultimately fascism. Hayek’s arguments predict that a management paradigm of “reason and reason alone” as portrayed in *Atlas Shrugged* would result in a centralized, control-oriented organization. By contrast, Hayek argues that organizations that rely on traditional beliefs as well as reason would tend toward more decentralized, market-oriented models of management. Though Rand would never endorse socialism, Hayek’s claim that reason alone ultimately results in fascism is difficult to dismiss as one observes the subservient social structures that emerge by the end of the novel.

In the end, the objectivist advocates living from a position of strength and independence whereas the Christian advocates living from a position of humility, finitude, and dependence upon the grace of God. These different starting places result in very different managerial outcomes.

Conclusion

T.S. Eliot wrote, “Man is man because he can recognize supernatural realities, not because he can invent them. Either everything in man can be traced as a development from below, or something must come from above. There is no avoiding this dilemma: you must either be a naturalist or a supernaturalist.”²³ By her own admission, Rand falls on the naturalist side of Eliot’s demarcation, and I, by my own admission, fall on the side of the supernaturalist.

Rand saw her philosophy as a package deal that should either be accepted entirely or rejected entirely. Readers are not free to accept a part of her framework and reject the rest. As such, Rand could be characterized as the “Party of Or.” For example, she contends that either you’re rational or you’re irrational; that you’re a productive worker or you’re a thief. Whereas Rand could be characterized as the “Party of Or,” Christianity could be characterized as the “Party of And.” In contrast to an objectivist framework, a Christian framework can be much more inclusive. Christianity embraces both faith *and* reason, work *and* rest, individuality *and* community. As such, Christianity allows for a

much broader conversation and decision set. I believe that a Christian perspective can offer students the possibility of capturing more of the complexity and richness of existence.

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ENDNOTES

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²A. Rand, *Atlas shrugged* (New York: Signet Books, 1957).

³The results of this survey can be found at the Library of Congress Web site at <http://www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/booklists.html>.

⁴E. Diefendorf and D. Bryan, *The New York Public Library's books of the century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁵The results of this survey are at <http://www.randomhouse.com/modernlibrary/100bestnovels.html>.

⁶See Michael S. Berliner (Ed.), *The Letters of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton Publishing, 1995) for an edited collection of Rand's letters.

⁷Dr. Edwin A. Locke of the University of Maryland is one of the key players in this effort. A clear statement of his objectivist views can be found in his autobiographical essay "Principled Ambition" in Arthur Bedeian (Ed.), *Management Laureates*, Vol. 2 (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1993) and in his positive review of *Atlas Shrugged* (1989) in

the *Academy of Management Review*, 14(1), (pp. 100-103). Other examples of objectivist thought in top management journals include T.E. Becker (1998), "Integrity in Organizations: Beyond Honesty and Conscientiousness," *Academy of Management Review*, 23(1), (pp. 154-161); E.A. Locke and T.E. Becker (1998), "Rebuttal to a Subjectivist Critique of an Objectivist Approach to Integrity in Organizations," *Academy of Management Review*, 23(1), (pp. 170-175); E.A. Locke and J. Woiceshyn (1995), "Why Businessmen Should be Honest: The Argument from Rational Egoism," *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 16(5), (pp. 405-414); and E.A. Locke (2002), "The Epistemological Side of Teaching Management: Teaching Through Principles," *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 1(2), (pp. 195-205).

⁸See G.M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁹Philosopher John W. Robbins critiques Rand's philosophy from an explicitly Christian stance in his books *Answer to Ayn Rand* (Washington, DC: Mount Vernon Publishing, 1974) and *Without A Prayer: Ayn Rand and the Close of Her System* (Hobbs, NM: Trinity Foundation, 1997). Other systematic critiques of objectivism include W.F. O'Neill, *With Charity Toward None: An Analysis of Ayn Rand's Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1971); D.J. Den Uyl and D.B. Rasmussen, *The Philosophic Thought of Ayn Rand* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984); and P.F. Erickson, *The Stance of Ayn Rand: An Examination of the Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (Portland, OR: Herakles Press, 1997).

¹⁰See Courtois, Werth, Panné, Paczkowski, Bartošek, and Margolin, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) for such evidence.

¹¹N. Branden and B. Branden, *Who is Ayn Rand?* (New York: Paperback Library, 1967).

¹²Although much has been written in this area in the past few years, *Business Through the Eyes of Faith*, by R.C. Chewning, J.W. Eby, and S.J. Roels, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990) still serves as a useful introduction.

¹³See Robbins (1997), p. xiii.

¹⁴One notable example of this is R.V. Pierard's "No Economic System Flows Directly from Scripture," in R.C. Chewning (Ed.) *Biblical*

Principles and Economics: The Foundations (Colorado Springs, CO: NAVPRESS, 1989).

¹⁵Miroslav Volf discusses the implications of a gift-based theology in his book *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

¹⁶Miroslav Volf makes this case well in his book *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

¹⁷See Miroslav Volf's *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

¹⁸Two examples of this literature include Marva J. Dawn's *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989) and Tilden Edwards' *Sabbath Time* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982).

¹⁹J. Pieper, *Leisure, the basis of culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1952).

²⁰The complete story of Advent Industries can be found in John D. Beckett's book *Loving Monday: Succeeding in Business Without Selling Your Soul* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998).

²¹M. Novak, *Business as a calling* (New York: The Free Press, 1996).

²²F.A. Hayek, *The fatal conceit: The errors of socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

²³T.S. Eliot, Second thought about humanism, *Selected Essays 1917-1932* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1932).

