

Respect for Money as the Foundation of Society

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One of the main philosophical themes in Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* is that of the difference between making money and having money. The heroes of the story, including John Galt and Francisco D'Anconia, hold as their moral standard the idea that making money is superior to simply having money; that it is detrimental to the human spirit to have money without earning it. The villains, such as James Taggart, claim the possession of money as one of their goals, whether or not they make it. To this end, they put a great deal of effort into finding ways to strip the heroes of the money they have made, even going so far as to pretend that their purpose is to rid the world of "selfishness." The difference in their understanding of money exemplifies the opposing philosophies of the producers and the looters.

John Galt and Francisco D'Anconia stand out from James Taggart and his band of looters because they know the value of money, and understand that money is virtuous, not of itself, but for what it represents - man's work and effort. "Wealth," says D'Anconia, "is the product of man's capacity to think (382)." In holding money in high esteem, he holds mankind in high esteem. The greatest thing in the world, he says, is the ability of man to think, and produce, and create. "The ingenuity of man is his noblest and most joyous power... (682)" It is this intangible quality of man that Galt and Francisco hold to be of such importance - and they value money because it is the symbol of this. They bear money as their banner because they believe in man's power to build and to achieve.

If money is the consequence and measure of man's achievement, then a society which wishes to respect man's success must be founded on a respect for money. The principles of trade and exchange are, D'Anconia believes, the perfect principles on which men may base a society.

A civilization based on the morality that money stands for is the most honest and the most just that a civilization can be. “To trade by means of money is the code of the men of good will. Money rests on the axiom that every man is the owner of his mind and his effort...(385)” If a world is built on this principle, that each man is responsible for and entitled to his own accomplishments, then there is no room for injustice, tyranny, or looting.

Opposing the heroes’ crusade is the society of men who, though they live among the fruits of wealth, claim that money is the root of evil. That the few are rich and the many are poor is unjust, they say. Therefore the few must give the many their wealth, or use it for the benefit of the many. Their creed - they say - is that all men should be equal. Their words, however, do not match their actions. Hidden behind this façade of goodwill are the looters, those same plunderers who have pillaged men’s property, now veiled under a new and more dangerous concealment; that of compassion and “selflessness.”

James Taggart is the best example of the proponents of “selflessness” because he himself is deluded by his claims. He manages to convince himself that he wants the best for mankind, and that if the great men show compassion to the lesser men the world will be at rights. He says to his sister, “It seems to me there are more important things in life than money (17).” Exactly what these “more important things” are he is unclear about, even to himself. He speaks vaguely of “selflessness” and “compassion” and giving the weaker men “a chance.” He argues feebly with Dagny about whether they should use Reardon Metal for their rails, or continue to order the material from Orren Boyle. Taggart says he feels the weaker manufacturer should be given a chance, despite his past failure to produce. He acts and makes decisions on the opposite principle that John Galt does – Taggart appears to believe that money is not the measure of man’s productiveness, but of his so-called selfishness. Where Francisco D’Anconia says that

“□ money is the product of virtue (382-387),” Taggart promotes the idea that the more money a man has, the more he must have usurped from his fellow men. Where D’Anconia understands that money must be earned to be of any worth, Taggart believes the only way to obtain money is by looting it from other men.

Taggart’s apparent distaste for money is an indication of his guilt for his lack of personal achievement. Although he has money to spare, he has earned none of it, leeching what he has from the productivity of his father and his sister. Because he does not deserve his money, he does not respect it. Francisco D’Anconia says that “...the man who damns money has obtained it dishonorably; the man who respects it has earned it... (382-387)” Taggart is a perfect example of the former kind of man – the one who has not earned his money, and therefore does not understand its worth. What measure of a man is money if he has not obtained it through honest work? None; indeed, it tells a lie about its owner. Money obtained through theft and looting, or unworthy inheritance, ceases to serve its function and condemns its possessor. Taggart’s money condemns him, and he knows it – and his response is to revile it.

There is another kind of selfishness than that which Taggart calls immoral; there is the true self-interest of the man who knows what his effort is worth. This is the selfishness of John Galt. Each man is and can be responsible for only himself. No amount of moralistic prattle will change the fact that there is only one thing any man has control of: himself. Galt believes, and acts on the belief, that “...a being who does not hold his own life as the motive and goal of his actions is acting on the motive and standard of *death* (932).” The strength of this belief is so strong that Galt and his fellows take this oath: “I swear by my life and by my love of it that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine (627).”

The difference between the views of money held by the heroes and the villains is the driving force behind their conflict. Their opinions of human worth and the moral value of selfishness are evident in their views of money. Each man acts according to his beliefs about mankind; each man demonstrates his beliefs by his words and actions regarding money. Money becomes the moral standard by which men are judged, and their reactions to money divide the producers from the looters. Money, then, is the philosophical foundation of their world.

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