

COMPROMISING WITH REALITY?

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In Ayn Rand's novel *Atlas Shrugged*, the theme of the book is evident in the conflict between its hero, John Galt, and his antithesis, Mr. Thompson. The conflict between these two men is the conflict between reality and denial of reality; it is the conflict between life and death; it is the conflict between reason and irrationality; it is the conflict between individual rights, which are real and all-important, and "collective rights," which are a trick of destroyers and a contradiction in terms.

Mr. Thompson is anxious to negotiate with John Galt because he knows that the only way he can achieve his objective (Galt's mental enslavement) is through compromise. Thompson's goal is power over the world, but he wants moral sanction on this; he wants his victims (primarily the producers such as John Galt) to pretend that they are willing to co-operate with his objective and place themselves in his service. If he can obtain the voluntary surrender of his victims, then he has won not only a physical victory (of power over the driving force of the world), but also a moral victory - the "right" to hold that power. To achieve his full objective, power and the moral sanction to wield it, he *must* convince Galt to publicly compromise with him. But "There can be no compromise on basic principles or on fundamental issues" (*Virtue* 80). Galt refuses to surrender his morality or his soul.

The decision to deny or accept reality is the decision to accept the standard of life or the standard of death. John Galt understands this, and accepts life and reality as his standard of value. He refuses to submit to any claims on his soul. It is bad enough when a looter violates another's rights through superior force. It is far, far worse when the looters' claim on their superiors is the looters' own incompetence and inability; when the weak use their own weakness

as a weapon against the producers. But “there comes a point, in the defeat of any man of virtue, when his own consent is needed for evil to win – and that no manner of injury done to him by others can succeed if he chooses to withhold his consent” (1048). Galt refuses to give his consent to Mr. Thompson. He refuses to surrender reality.

One of Ayn Rand’s complaints with the doctrine of the looters is its perversion of the word “compromise.” A true compromise is “an adjustment of conflicting claims by mutual concessions. This means that... both parties agree upon some fundamental principle which serves as a base for their deal.” (*The Virtue...79*) A real compromise, then, can only be achieved between two parties who agree on a standard of value. Otherwise, any concessions made are not compromise, but surrender. Galt and Thompson do not agree on their standard of value, so no compromise can exist between them. Thompson asks Galt to surrender and call it a compromise; Galt refuses to be a party to such denial of reality.

This doctrine of compromise leads to a far more dangerous one: that of self-sacrifice. When a man surrenders his life and calls it a “small compromise,” he has given up the right to his soul. The altruists then tell him that the guilt he feels exists because he has not debased himself enough, and that the way to assuage his guilt is by turning over the product of his mind, and ultimately the control of his mind, to them. The altruists tell man that he must redeem himself, and that his redemption lies in the destruction of his soul. First they create his guilt, and then they use it as their weapon for looting.

Ayn Rand believed that the philosophy of altruism took three prominent forms. These were the mystic, the social, and the subjective. Although all three appear in *Atlas Shrugged* as the driving force behind the looters/moochers, the one which Mr. Thompson invokes to back up his claim on John Galt is the social philosophy – that which holds that one’s “duty is to be the

selfless, voiceless, rightless slave of any need, claim, or demand asserted by others” (“The Objectivist Ethics” 38). A group (such as a society) gains any “collective rights” it may have *only* from the rights of those individuals who have voluntarily decided to become part of the group. Group rights are based on individual rights; when they digress from individual rights the group has forfeited its claim to legitimacy. “A nation that violates the rights of its own citizens cannot claim any rights whatsoever. In the issue of rights, as in all moral issues, there can be no double standard” (121). Collective rights cannot be based on violation of individual rights; for those in command of a group to have power over the others, they must first obtain their victims’ sanction, which comes from voluntary surrender. It is this voluntary surrender and pretense of rights which Mr. Thompson demands of John Galt, which Galt does not grant him.

How does the altruist obtain this surrender? By playing on men’s pity, and convincing the producers that it is their “duty” to work for the benefit of others. Mr. Thompson pleads with John Galt: “I came here to appeal to your conscience! ...can’t you take pity on them? Can’t you help them? ...I’m begging you to pity those who suffer” (1112 - 1114). Thompson claims that the only person in the world who does not have a moral right to Galt’s ability is Galt himself. Galt denies this claim. In his own words, he “is the first man of ability who refused to regard it as guilt” (*Atlas Shrugged* 1050). He does not feel guilt for the fact that his ability is greater than others’. Thompson attempts to use Galt’s guilt to bring him to a compromise, but Galt has no guilt, and does not compromise. He stands by his belief that “there are two sides to every issue: one side is right and one side is wrong but the middle is always evil” (*Atlas Shrugged* 1054). Galt chooses his side: reality.

It is this pretense of compromise that the altruists attempt, the “compromise” between life or death of the self which Leonard Peikoff points out as one of the “ominous parallels” between pre-Hilter Germany and present-day America:

[T]he Enlightenment moralists remain... modern ‘moderates’ who are content to tolerate the self – and eager to extol its piecemeal abnegation. Man’s ego, in their eyes, is not a demon to be exorcised, but a homely stepchild to be dutifully awarded ‘a certain cold esteem,’ before one proceeds to the realm of ‘ardent love or admiration,’ the truly moral realm: self-sacrifice. (Peikoff 73)

The reality is that there can be no compromise between life and death. It is this reality which Mr. Thompson attempts to deny, and asks Galt to help him deny; it is this reality which Galt acknowledges. He refuses give his mind into their service, because if he grants them even the smallest assistance, he has surrendered completely to their claim upon his being. Therefore, he refuses, and accepts torture at his captors’ hands as payment for his refusal.

(1195 words)

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