

Chapter 7: Political Philosophy

Overview: Political philosophy addresses questions about how we should live, how society should be structured, and more. In this chapter, we will look at two political philosophies on opposite ends of the political spectrum: Karl Marx from the communist perspective, and Ayn Rand from the libertarian perspective.

Major Ideas: After reading the material in this chapter and hearing the lecture, you should understand the following major ideas in depth, but other parts of the reading may appear on the assessment (besides names and dates).

Karl Marx

Dialectical Materialism
Economic Determinism
Critique of Capitalism

Ayn Rand

Positive versus Negative Liberty
Libertarianism
Ethical Egoism
Rational Self Interest

Karl Marx

Political Philosophy

Before we get into the two philosophical archetypes for this chapter, the topic of political philosophy more generally should be addressed.

Political philosophy addresses questions about how people can live together in a society, or whether people should live together in the first place. Inevitably, much of political philosophy focuses on the best form of government or economic system. Capitalism? Democracy? Socialism? Communism? Autocracy? In this chapter we will focus first on Karl Marx, his favored form of government being communism and his favored economic system being socialism. Then we will look at Ayn Rand, her favored form of government being libertarian and her favored economic system being capitalism. As we go along, some of the crucial terms above will be defined.

It is important to note how the material in this chapter differs from a typical discussion of politics. In a typical discussion of politics, especially in a heated one, many assumptions are made and not clarified. For example, a typical democrat will argue that the *Affordable Care Act* (Obamacare) should be supported. Although this person will likely argue that it should be supported because it's good for the country, the assumption he or she is making centers on the definition of *good*. Because democrats are typically in favor of a larger government, what is good to them will often be identified with a social program that expands government, like Obamacare. The same is true of the typical republican, who would likely argue *against* Obamacare because it *expands* government—in other words, the republican has a different idea of what is *good*.

So what is good then, and how can we ever know what it is if everyone has their own conception of it? Questions like this take us back to relativism. Indeed, political philosophy falls under the value theory branch of philosophy, and one could certainly argue that political values, like all values, are relative. However, keep in mind that, however

difficult it is to define the good, there are not an infinite amount of answers, and even people who disagree over what is fundamentally good can agree on other basic goods. For example, both democrats and republicans generally agree that education is important. They might disagree on the details, but they agree on that core value. It should also be noted that, especially after the 2016 US presidential election, the typical political categories in the US are changing, as they always have over the years.¹

A good reason to care about this material is that, whether or not you think it's all relative, there is a practical value to learning about it because *the question of the good has already been answered by those in power*. Humans today are living in societies based on a conception of good established and institutionalized by our ancestors. And when someone's conception of the good centers on a dictatorship, then there are arguably many reasons to worry.² As citizens of a free society, we have a right to critically evaluate the political choices of those in power, including the philosophy those choices are based upon. And this sort of critical evaluation is exactly what we'll be doing in this chapter, focusing, again, on two opposite ends of the political spectrum: communism and libertarianism.

Because communism emphasizes a socialist economy and libertarianism emphasizes a capitalist economy, it will help to have a working definition of each economic system. *Socialism* is defined as a system in which the means of production are controlled primarily by the government or state. *Capitalism* is defined as a system in which the means of production are controlled primarily by private owners. The means of production just refers to the way goods and services are produced and distributed, like railroads, factories, or the internet.

¹ See: Aldrich, J. H. (1995). *Why Parties?: The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

² To be fair, some have argued for some benefits of a nearly absolute authority, perhaps most famously: Machiavelli, N. (1992). *The Prince*. P. Smith (Ed.). New York, NY: Dover Publications.

Karl Marx

Karl Marx (1818-1883 c.e.), the founder of communism, was born in Prussia, a former state of the German empire. He was born into poverty in the time of the *Industrial Revolution*, a period of history in which new technologies were changing industry altogether.³ For example, automated factories allowed factory owners to use cheap human labor to produce goods that could be quickly and widely distributed. But herein lies the problem that Marx would eventually identify with the system that was developing, now known as capitalism: the owners get most of the money for the goods, while the workers get next to nothing. This theme of workers versus owners is one that runs through most of Marx's philosophy.

While Marx was born into poverty, he would later meet the wealthy Friedrich Engels (1820-1895 c.e.) in Paris, after getting in trouble in his home country for writing editorials critical of the government. Engels appreciated Marx's brilliance from the beginning, and would end up supporting Marx and his family for many years. The two men were friends until Marx's death. Marx was philosophically brilliant, but could often be dense in his writing, making it difficult to appeal to as many people. A concise and direct writer, Engels took Marx's ideas and made them digestible. The most famous book that the two men published together, *The Communist Manifesto*, is one of the most influential books ever written.⁴

Philosophically, Marx and Engels agreed on a lot. They both agreed that economic and social conditions were extremely powerful forces, as we will see. They both agreed that communism, as they saw it, was the solution. They also both agreed that academic life in general, and philosophy in particular, should be more practical. Undoubtedly, some of you probably felt that way about some of the arguments in the

³ Although the industrial revolution is often divided up in stages historically, for the purposes of this class we will ignore those details and focus on the technological results of the revolution as a whole.

⁴ Marx, K. & F. Engels. (2008). *The Communist Manifesto*. Radford, VA: Wilder Publications.

previous chapter, like the cogito. How is that practical? As noted in the previous chapter, one could argue that the cogito is practical on a subjective, personal level. However, Marx saw practicality as being related to societal change.

And this brings us to an interesting question about the *purpose*, the telos, of the university: what is the primary goal of a university? Marx is famous for saying that, “Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”⁵ For Marx, philosophical analysis is only useful insofar as it leads to social change, what today we might call *social justice*. This suggests that the point of university life in general is for change.

However, other thinkers of Marx’s time saw it differently. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873 c.e.), a British philosopher, saw the university’s purpose as being *the truth*. Although we may all have our respective interests—psychology, sociology, gender studies—we all share a desire for the truth, for understanding the world, at least according to Mill. Here’s a quote from Mill that represents this view:

He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side, if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion.⁶

In other words, before reaching the truth, one must understand all sides of the debate in question. If we are focused on social change over understanding, will that lead us *away* from the truth?

To put all this in perspective, a job announcement I once saw for a faculty position at a university in California says that the candidate should have, “Earned [a] doctorate in an appropriate field of study and

⁵ It appears in: Marx, K. & F. Engels. (1998). *Theses on Feuerbach*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

⁶ See: Mill, J. S. (2002). *On Liberty*. London, England: Dover Publications.

[have a] demonstrated record of commitment to educational equity and social justice.”⁷ Marx would probably be ok with this quote, but Mill would have an issue with it. If the candidate is supposed to have a bias in favor of social justice, will he or she be able to teach and grade fairly? Will the commitment to social justice get in the way of truth and understanding? It is a complicated issue, and one wonders if both social justice and truth can be compatible.

In any case, we know what side Marx was on. Let’s now move to Marx’s philosophy itself.

Dialectical Materialism

As noted, Marx believed that economic forces have a great impact on our world, more so than any prior thinker had highlighted. However, in order to understand Marx’s view, it is important to briefly discuss the view of the person Marx’s philosophy was a response to. That person was Georg Hegel (1770-1831 c.e.), a renowned philosopher even in his time.

Hegel’s view is sometimes called *absolute idealism* since he gives us a vision of history leading towards an idea state/society. Recall that we learned about idealism/immaterialism from an epistemological perspective when we discussed Berkeley. But Hegel’s view is a metaphysical one, about the nature of reality, specifically about the nature of human history.

The Socratic method, recall, is a question and answer technique in which an idea is proposed, critiqued, then modified. Hegel took this process of a struggle between ideas and applied it to historical epochs, or ages. So instead of a conversation between people, Hegel’s idealism is a “conversation” between historical periods. For Hegel, each historical period represents some core, central idea—or *zeitgeist*, a German word

⁷ At CSU San Marcos, here is the listing:
https://www.csusm.edu/facultyopportunities/faculty_jobs/TT%20Postings/MM%20TT%201617.html

that means the spirit of an age or time. For example, when the early Christian and Muslim philosophers were developing their versions of monotheism, the central idea was that of God. However, this zeitgeist conflicted with the zeitgeist of individualism and reason during the European enlightenment period. Although there is a dominant Zeitgeist in each age, Hegel argued, there are always new ideas struggling to overtake the dominant one, often leading to a synthesis of those ideas. When thinkers like Martin Luther said that individualism, reason, and God could all be compatible, they were contributing to this synthesis. But once ideas are synthesized, they become dominant, and then a new idea arises to counter it, thus continuing the process. In the standard dialectical process, an idea is proposed (the thesis), then a conflicting idea is proposed (antithesis), and then they come to a resolution (the synthesis).

However, it doesn't end there for Hegel, because he believed that this dialectical process of ideas evolving through different ages of human civilization would continue until we reached an ideal society—hence the *idealism* part of his theory. Additionally, Hegel believed that this process is guided by some sort of God-like entity that he called *absolute spirit*. For Hegel, history is the process of God's idea unfolding itself through the dialectical process.

Marx liked Hegel's idea of the dialectic, but he didn't like the supernatural parts of it, like absolute spirit. In fact, another famous quote from Marx is, "Religion is the opium of the people."⁸ In other words, Marx was an atheist who believed that religion, like a drug, just blinds us from the truth. And the truth for Marx is related to economics rather than God.

For Marx, history is not unfolding based on ideas, but based on the material conditions of society. By material conditions Marx is referring

⁸ The quote is often translated in different ways, but originally appeared here: Marx, K. (1970). *Marx's Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. A Jolin & J. O'Malley (Eds.). Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

literally to how and where people live (in poverty, shacks, castles, etc.) and the types of industry and machinery that make up the economic system (factories, trains, etc.). The struggle for Marx in the dialectic is not with ideas, but with economic classes. In particular, Marx points out that there is a constant struggle within societies between the middle or ruling class, the *bourgeoisie*, and the lower or exploited class, the *proletariat*. The problem is that the bourgeoisie typically control the means of production, allowing them to easily exploit the proletariat. As these struggles continue over time, they lead us to new socio-economic systems.⁹ For example, the injustices of capitalism constitute one thesis, socialism is the antithesis, and a communist society is the synthesis. Like Hegel, Marx also created his own theory of history, except in Marx's version there are only five stages: 1) primitive communism, 2) era of slavery, 3) feudalism, 4) capitalism, and 5) communism.

But what, exactly, did Marx mean by communism in the first place? What would a communist society look like? We know for starters that Marx advocated for a socialist economy with no private property. For Marx, the concept of private property began in the time of primitive communism, leading us ultimately to capitalism, a system that exploits workers and allows the rich to get richer. For Marx, if we had a society of communism, where everyone is provided basic services by the state, then we would no longer undergo the struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat. We would live in equality, and humans could truly flourish. Part of Marx's argument for communism depends on the injustices of capitalism, which we will turn to in a bit.

But it's important to note here that Marx wasn't as thorough as he could have been with how communism should be implemented. For one, he said that the workers would have to violently remove the capitalists from power, because they would never relinquish their power otherwise. But he didn't make it clear how the transition of power should work. Should there be a temporary oligarchy (rule by an elite group)? Who should be

⁹ The term *socio-economic* is often used in reference to Marx because he saw economic conditions and social conditions as deeply intertwined.

the leaders? To what extent should the leaders have to abide by the principles of communism? Are they exempt? Based on everything else Marx said, it seems likely that he would not be happy with some of the countries that eventually became communist, from North Korea to China to Russia. We see leaders in countries like these who are clearly after power, and live in much more luxury than their people—this sort of power differential is distinctly what Marx was trying to avoid. The question is, is the failure of the implementation of communism due to weaknesses in the theory itself, or just weaknesses in those who've attempted to implement it? Could a more just leader implement communism more effectively? Or would *any* leader become corrupted by power? These are difficult questions, and there aren't easy answers.

Economic Determinism

Are you a democrat? A republican? What about your parents and friends? Are you a Christian? A Buddhist? A Muslim? What about your parents and friends? Statistically speaking, most people adopt the beliefs of their parents, a fact that supports Marx's theory of *economic determinism*, the idea that our beliefs and values are strongly determined by our socio-economic circumstances. Underlying all of his other philosophy is this view that values are not freely chosen but rather produced by the social status of the people we hang around with. It is important to note Marx is not referring to the determinism discussed with the Presocratics. The latter view of determinism says that *every* action we take is determined, and thus there is no free will. Marx's economic determinism, by contrast, says that we are largely determined by socio-economic factors. You might not become a Hindu if your parents are Hindus, but it's pretty likely that you will.

Marx divided society into a *substructure* and a *superstructure*. The substructure contains the means of production, including the technology involved and the owners who control it. The superstructure is everything that is not part of the economic system: art, philosophy, games, religion,

and so forth. According to Marx—and this is the crux of economic determinism—the substructure shapes the superstructure.

Critique of Capitalism

Marx's critique of capitalism is searing, and others throughout the years have borrowed some of his criticisms. Former presidential primary candidate Bernie Sanders, for example, shares one of Marx's primary critiques: the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. On the campaign trail, Sanders was fond of referencing *the 1%*, the small group of humans on the planet who control most of the wealth. Like Marx, Sanders also favors socialist policies, and has identified as a socialist in the past. However, it would be unfair to call Sanders a full blown communist, since he does not share some of Marx's core views, like a violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie.

One of Marx's specific critiques of capitalism is *surplus value*. The economic principle of supply and demand controls prices on the market. And yet, the wages that the workers (proletariat) get paid are very low, so no matter how much demand there is for a product, the laborers don't see the profit since the owners (bourgeoisie) take it. This profit is known the surplus value. Thus, capitalists can continue to earn more and more and pay the laborers next to nothing.

The next critique focuses on a paradox of capitalism: the very people being exploited, the workers, grow to love it. Marx calls this phenomenon *co-option*. Co-option happens because the workers' values are shaped—through education and the media, for example—by the capitalists themselves. Moreover, the workers learn to love capitalism itself, as an idea. The owners make them believe they can rise to the top through, for example, advertisements which glorify the capitalist life. But can they? No matter what the workers are led to believe, says Marx, they will always be kept in their place by the owners.

But workers are not just co-opted in capitalism, leading to his next critique. They are also kept in place by the very things that their labor

produces—games, movies, plays, and other forms of *entertainment*. But to Marx these are just other distractions, like religion, that keep the proletariat down. Additionally, workers who do develop some sort of frustration with the work place often take it out on the wrong people: *each other*. Instead, they should be working together to wrest power away from the owners.

The final critique is alienation. *Alienation* is a feeling of isolation, like not fitting in. Marx believed that in capitalism, workers are alienated from their work, and from each other, due to money being the bottom line. Why are you in school? Probably many of you would say money is at least one of the reasons. And Marx would say you only want money because you're economically determined to want it, having grown up in a capitalist economy. The problem, says Marx, is that capitalism conditions us to want money, but if we only want money then we can't be truly fulfilled. We can't be truly fulfilled unless we are working *for the sake of the work itself*. In other words, your job shouldn't just be something you do for money; it should be something that fulfills you, that allows you to flourish. If jobs are just about money, they turn people into walking dollar signs (or numbers), rather than dynamic human beings.

If you have ever been part of the labor force, then the feeling of alienation is likely familiar. Marx argued that capitalism turns what were once respected trades and professions into numbers. For the owners trying to turn a profit, it doesn't matter how much skill and personality you put into building a wooden desk; it matters how quickly you can produce it and how much money the finished product can procure. In capitalism, professions are only valuable insofar as they can make a profit for the capitalist.

Today, quite ironically, the university system itself in the US has been corporatized. For example, part time professors make up around 70% of all the faculty at most universities, simply because the university

administrators can save money that way. It's much cheaper to hire a part timer than to hire a full timer.¹⁰

As important as Marx's critique of capitalism is, his only solution is completely eliminating it in favor of communism, as discussed above. Many thinkers since Marx have taken his critiques seriously, but they believe capitalism can be and has been improved. For example, say what you will about labor unions, they often function as a check on corporate power, fighting for the rights of the workers.

¹⁰ It is a complicated situation, for more info see: Moser, R. (January 13, 2014). Overuse and abuse of adjunct faculty members threaten core academic values. In *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from: <http://www.chronicle.com/article/OveruseAbuse-of-Adjuncts/143951>.

Ayn Rand

Ayn Rand (1905-1982 c.e.) is one of the more popular philosophers we'll study in this class. So popular, in fact, that you are unlikely to see her in standard philosophy textbooks. Philosophers usually defend her exclusion by pointing out that she was more of a popularizer than an original thinker, and that her beliefs are expressed more deeply and clearly by other, more traditional philosophers. While I agree with this defense that some of Rand's ideas are expressed more clearly by some other philosophers (and we'll look at one of them soon), I do not agree that she was not an original thinker. I also think that she had an interesting life, and presents a perfect counterview to Marx's philosophy.

Rand was born into Russian communism in the early 20th century. After avoiding some political troubles in her home country, she was eventually able to come to the US as a young woman. At this point she had already rejected Marx and communism, drawing heavily from the philosophy of Aristotle. She believed that reason was the ultimate virtue, and that every other value should be subordinated to it. For example, she was an atheist, and thought that people who believed in God, and put God over reason, were being completely irrational and even contrary to their nature. She developed an entire philosophical perspective that she called *objectivism*.¹¹ She wrote two famous novels, *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*, both of which have been made into movies on multiple occasions.¹² Her novels typically represent the theme of an intelligent, independent thinker using his powers of reason to fight against a more collectivist organization.

¹¹ We will not study her full objectivist system in this class, just some of her core ideas, many of which are discussed here: Rand, A. (1968). *For the New Intellectual*. New York, NY: Signet.

¹² Rand, A. (1996). *Atlas Shrugged*. New York, NY: Signet; Rand, A. (1996). *The Fountainhead*. New York, NY: Signet.

Positive versus Negative Liberty

A distinction that will help us understand Marx and Rand is the distinction between positive liberty and negative liberty. *Positive liberty* is a view that suggests the most important freedoms are the ones that guarantee something for us from an outside entity, like a government or your parents. In other words, positive liberty is the right to be provided with things, like universal healthcare or education, or a daily meal. *Negative liberty*, suggests that the most important freedoms are the ones that keep us free from interference from outside entities. Negative liberty is, therefore, the right to be left alone.

Marx's philosophy is typically identified with positive liberty, since Marx wants a larger government that provides its people with more rights. Rand's philosophy is typically identified with libertarianism, the general view that the government should be as small as possible, which is why her philosophy is typically identified with negative liberty. Libertarians are about a step above anarchy in terms of the size of government. As the current republican senator, but libertarian at heart, Rand Paul once said: "I want a government really really small, so small that you can barely see it."¹³ Let's look at libertarianism in more depth.

Libertarianism

It is difficult to give an overarching definition of libertarianism because there are many different types, though proponents generally believe in less government, in personal liberty, and in peace. It is also difficult to trace libertarianism to a single thinker, though it is sometimes traced to John Locke, the empiricist we've already studied (remember, scholars of that time typically studied many different topics). More on Locke later, but the person often credited with perhaps the most respectable defense of libertarianism is the American philosopher from Harvard, Robert Nozick (1938-2001 c.e.). A quote from Nozick should emphasize a libertarian's political starting point:

¹³ He said this in the 4th republican presidential debate in 2015.

Individuals have rights, and there are things no person or group may do to them (without violating their rights). So strong and far reaching are these rights that they raise the question of what, if anything, the state and its officials may do.¹⁴

The rights Nozick is referring to here are based on negative liberty, the right to be left alone. Nozick argues that our right to be left alone is so foundational that a government must strongly justify any infringement of that right. So what, then, can the state or government do? For Nozick, a state should serve only two functions: 1) A monopoly on the use of force and 2) protection of the rights of all citizens of the state. In other words, if there is a legal disagreement, the state should settle it so people don't resort to violence. No citizens should be allowed to have their negative rights violated. There must be a military, just in case another country attacks. But note that libertarians generally do not believe in using that military for war, only for defense.

Marx argued that goods should be distributed by the government through a socialist economy. As you can guess, Nozick and other libertarians disagree. Nozick created *the entitlement theory*, which is his answer to how goods should be distributed in a fair society. His theory says that there are three principles of justice concerning the possession of goods:

1. A person is entitled to some good if she acquires it through a natural process (for example, if she builds her own house).
2. A person is entitled to some good if it is transferred to him from another person (for example, as a gift).
3. No one is entitled to a good except through repeated applications of 1 and 2.

But what about acquiring goods in the first place? What if someone acquires goods through an unjust process (by stealing, for example)? Is

¹⁴ Nozick lays out his theory here: Nozick, R. (1974). *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Basic Books.

this person entitled to it? Or what if something is stolen and then given to someone else? Is this other person who was given the good entitled to it? To get at these questions, Nozick turns to John Locke. In addition to contributing some important ideas to our founding fathers, Locke came up with *the theory of acquisition*.

Locke says that “mixing your labor with something” makes you the owner of that thing. But can we infringe others’ rights just by coming to own something ourselves? The possibility of infringing others’ rights is why Locke also says that you are entitled to something if you mixed your labor with it, *and* if there is enough good left in common for others. For example, if you dig into some land and find a natural spring, then build your house around it, you have total rights to that spring *unless* it is the only spring in an area where other humans live too. If other humans have no water to sustain their lives, then you have not left enough good in common for others.

More on Libertarianism: Taxes, Private Property, and Equality

Although Rand’s general philosophy coincides with the previous discussion of libertarianism, she and Nozick explicitly agree on a few things. For one, they both believed that taxes are a violation of rights. Taxation is like forced labor. Taxation also forces the person who needs material goods for happiness to be in a worse position than the person who only needs basic subsistence for happiness. In other words, taxation treats people as a means, rather than an end. It gives some people rights over others because it involves appropriating other people’s actions as though they are goods to be distributed. It allows some people to own other people, and this is a violation of negative liberty, according to Nozick and Rand. Adding to this, Rand also believed that altruism, or helping others, is typically done out of guilt, which also appropriates people as goods. However, as we will see below, if helping others is done for the right reasons, then it can have a place in Rand’s philosophy.

Marx believed that private property was one of the primary sources of suffering in this world. Libertarians like Rand and Nozick thought it was

a good thing. They ask, are people who do not own private property put in a worse situation by people who do own private property? They argue that the existence of private property is actually beneficial to society. For one, if separate individuals control resources (goods) rather than the state, then experimentation is encouraged because there is no central controlling agency (like the government) preventing new methods from being tried out. Private property also lets people decide what sort of financial risks they wish to bear. It provides alternate employment for those who can't find someone to hire them.

Nozick in particular felt that the free operation of the market will not violate anyone's rights, as long as Locke's idea that there be enough good left in common for others is not violated. The operation of the free market allows private property to be acquired and distributed according to the entitlement theory laid out above. Although there is disagreement about this between some libertarians, many believe in *laissez faire capitalism*, or unregulated capitalism: so when goods are distributed on the market, there is no government regulation (of monopolies, for example).

Again, Marx suggests that goods should be distributed fairly and equitably. But Nozick and Rand wonder why this should be the case. Why should the rest state of the system be equality? Why must differences in people's status be justified? Why should we compensate every inequality between people? Forcing equality into a system (with socialism, for example) is not a fair trade off when the freedom of citizens is at stake.

Proponents of socialism, Nozick and Rand argue, tend to downplay the differences between people, but at the same time want to buttress human liberty and autonomy. However, there is no better way to denigrate a person's autonomy than by nullifying natural endowments in order to achieve some sort of egalitarian ideal. Goods don't come to us as a result of them falling out of the sky; goods must be made or produced. Also,

often one person's greater intelligence can benefit others (with a scientific breakthrough in medicine, for example).

Despite these similarities, Rand's view differs from that of other libertarians in the moral theory that underpins her philosophy, which we will now turn to.

Ethical Egoism

We have already looked at some moral theories, namely virtue ethics and relativism. Now we turn to another. Recall that a moral theory is an attempt to explain morality. The problem with the theory we're looking at now is that it is often said to *turn morality upside down*. Ordinarily we see helping others as one of the best things that we can do, but this theory says that helping ourselves is one of the best things that we can do. *Ethical egoism* is the view that we are morally obligated to pursue our rational self interests. It is right for us morally to care about fulfilling our interests, but wrong for us morally to care about fulfilling others' interests.

Do not confuse this view with *psychological egoism*, which is just the theory, usually based on an observation of human behavior, that humans are, in fact, selfish. But are we? Is human nature selfish? It's a complicated question, though many people would say, yes, we are selfish by nature. Rand discusses a story from Plato called *the ring of Gyges*, where a man gets a ring that turns him invisible and then uses that power to take over a kingdom.¹⁵ Her view is that if anyone had that power, they would instantly do selfish things, even if they were considered good people before they got the ring. Why? Because, for Rand, we are all naturally selfish to begin with, and the only thing preventing us from acting on that selfishness is society itself. Why don't I steal? There's a law against it. If there were no law, if I had the ring of Gyges, then I *would* steal—at least, according to Rand and other ethical

¹⁵ The story appears in the second chapter of Plato's *Republic*, cited in the ancient Greek philosophy chapter of this reader.

egoists. This is the beginning of what political theorists call *social contract theory*. A proponent of this theory was Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679 c.e.), who famously said that a man's life in the state of nature, without society, is "nasty, brutish, and short."¹⁶ Because of this, because we are all selfish, we must have a social contract that binds us to certain rules—like a constitution.

While the ring of Gyges is often used to discuss social contract theory, Rand uses it to highlight what she sees as the selfishness of human nature alone. And this premise, that humans are selfish, is the primary driver of ethical egoism. Because we are selfish, egoism says, we should pursue our interests; otherwise we are going against our own nature. Now we can see more clearly why Rand is against altruism. If you are helping others before you help yourself, where does that leave you? For the ethical egoist, it leaves you in an inauthentic place. Ethical egoism teaches people to stand up for their own desires, and to not feel guilty about them. For Rand, much supposed altruistic behavior is motivated by guilt, rather than by rational reasons.

Moreover, if everyone were pursuing their rational self interests instead of falsely, and sometimes condescendingly, trying to help others, then we'd live in a better society. This is a point where Marx and Rand actually agree: both believe that people should be pursuing what truly makes them happy, their true interests. Marx, however, thinks that pursuit can only happen in communism, while for Rand it has got to be capitalism. For Rand, without a *laissez faire* capitalist system, the government will become too involved in guiding people's interests (though regulations and taxation, for example). An individualist, Rand believes that the market should not put any restrictions on our rational pursuits. But what exactly does she mean by rational self interests?

¹⁶ It appears in Hobbes' famous work: Hobbes, T. (1982). *The Leviathan*. C. B. MacPherson (Ed.). New York, NY: Penguin.

Rational Self Interest

Acting on your rational self interest means that you are acting on a set of moral principles that are objectively right for you. In other words, the theory of ethical egoism says that there is objectivity to our personal desires in the sense some people are right for one profession, and others are right for other professions. I doubt LeBron James ever wanted to excel at ping pong. I doubt that teaching sociology would have been the right fit for Jimmy Page. You are probably aware of natural abilities and talents you already have that make you more suited to a particular career.

But one of the crucial consequences of ethical egoism is that we can be wrong about what's right for us. In other words, we might be mistaken about our own rational self interests. I may believe that going to New York to try my hand at stand up comedy is my path, when in fact my path is to be a comedy writer. Following your rational self interests does not mean doing whatever you want; it means doing the objectively right thing to allow you to flourish. Rand envisions a society with a minimal government that preserves everyone's rational self interest, allowing people to pursue their interests freely.

Although Rand is clearly against altruism when it is done out of guilt, there is no provision in her philosophy that seems to preclude helping others *after* one has already pursued and achieved his own interests.