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ASSERTION OF INDIVIDUALITY OF THE PROTAGONIST IN ANTHEM BY AYN RAND

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ABSTRACT

The present paper produces the proof which Ayn Rand has laid scattered throughout in her remarkable novel Anthem, which are manifested through the character of the protagonist who remains silent for many years under the oppressive government. Equality, the protagonist becomes the mouth piece of the author's philosophy of individuality and objectivism. Although the society is shown regressive, the element of individualism, quest for identity and then longing to prove it makes the theme transcend all the barriers of time.

Key words: freedom, oppressive society, transgression, objectivism

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Ayn Rand is a fascinating person and an inspiring advocate of freedom. Rand's passionate and moralistic tone is probably a real part of her appeal and is no less than an equal and opposite reaction to the self-righteousness that is still characteristic of the leftist rhetoric. Rand's writing emphasizes the philosophic concepts of objective reality in metaphysics, reason in epistemology and rational egoism in ethics. In politics she was a proponent of laissez – faire capitalism and a staunch defender of individual rights, believing that the sole function of a proper government is protection of individual rights. She believed that individuals must choose their values and actions solely by reason, and that "Man-every man– is an end in himself, not the means to the ends of others". According to Rand,

"The individual must exist for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others, nor sacrificing others to himself. The pursuit of his own rational self-interest and of his own happiness is the highest moral purpose of his life". (Rand: 260)

Because she held that faith is antithetical to reason, Rand opposed religion. She firmly believed,

"Mankind is not an entity, an organism or a coral bush. The entity involved in production and trade is MAN. It is with the study of man, - not of the loose aggregate known as a "community"– that any science of the humanities has to begin". (Rand: 15).

Rand decried the initiation of force and fraud, and held that government action should consist only in protecting citizens from criminal aggression via the police and foreign aggression via the military and in maintaining a system of courts to decide guilt or innocence for objectively defined crimes and to resolve

disputes. Rand, a self-described hero-worshiper stated in her book, *The Romantic Manifesto (1969)* that the goal of her writing was “The projection of an ideal man”. In reference to her philosophy, Objectivism, she said,

“My philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute” (Rand :259) .

Rand’s respect for philosophy is one virtue of her system, but her epistemology and metaphysics miss much of the point of modern philosophy. Indeed, her ideal was Aristotle whose views of substance steered Rand away from a reductionist materialism. Her concepts refer to every characteristic contained in every individual of their kind. This was not the view of Aristotle who realized that if there are natural kinds, they are both essential and accidental characteristics of those kinds. The meaning of concepts would be about essential characteristics. One suspects that Rand was not one to let God claim some superior status to human comprehension and knowledge. Rand’s description of “concept formation” seems more sensible. Qualities are abstracted from experience and formulated into concepts.

Evidently aware of that tension, there is the motivation for Rand’s idea that concepts refer to everything in the objects. That preserves the objectivism of her theory, and so the appropriateness of “objectivism” as the name of it leads down to the paradoxical road of a Leibnizian theory of concepts.

Man’s self, as Ayn Rand held, is his mind or conceptual faculty, the faculty of reason. Man’ derives all spiritually distinctive attributes from this faculty. For instance, it is reason that leads to man’s emotions. And it is reason which possesses volition, the ability to make choices. But reason is a property of the individual. There is no such thing as a collective brain. The ego, therefore, is that which constitutes the essential identity of a human being. The ‘ego’ is “the ‘I’ or ‘self’ of any person, as thinking, feeling, willing and distinguishing itself from the selves of others and from the objects of its thought . It is obvious why Ayn Rand exacts man’s ego. In doing so, she is implicitly upholding the central principles of her philosophy and of her heroes; reason, values, volition, individualism. Her villains, by contrast, do not think, judge, and will; they are second-handers, and run by others. Having renounced their mind, they are in literal sense, self-less.

“*Anthem*, in Miss Rand’s mind, was an ode to man’s ego. It was not difficult, therefore, to change the working title: to move from “ego” to “ode” or “anthem”, leaving the object celebrated by the ode to be discovered by the reader”. (Peikoff:12).

The theme of *Anthem* (1937) determines its genre. As Miss Ayn Rand has said:

“*Anthem* has a story, but not plot, i.e. not progression of events leading inexorably to an action-climax and a resolution. The closest thing to a climax in *Anthem*, the hero’s discovery of the word “I”, is not an existential action, but an internal event, progress of cognition, which is besides, partly accidental.” (Rand: 7).

*Anthem* does not exemplify Ayn Rand’s usual artistic approach, which she called “Romantic Realism”. In contrast to her other novels, there is no realistic, contemporary background and relatively little attempt to recreate perceptual, conversational or psychological detail; the story takes place in a remote, primitive future and told in the simple, quasi-biblical terms that befit such time and world. In *Anthem*, Ayn Rand shows the full reality of the ideals held by the Communists, fascists and their intellectual supporters. The underlying principle in the novel is that of Collectivism; Society is paramount, and the individual must remain subordinated to its dictates. The Collectivists hold that an individual exists solely to serve the state and has no “inalienable right” to a free life or to the pursuit of happiness. Thus the citizens of this story are like mindless robots. They cannot think for themselves; they must blindly obey the commands of the councils. The Great Truth which all must accept is this:

“All men are one and that there is no will save the will of all men together”. (Rand: 20)

She reveals her principle of collectivism in the beginning of the novel thus:

“It is a fearful word, alone the laws say that none among men may be alone, ever and at any time, for this is the great transgression, the root of all evils....” (Rand: 17)

Equality 7 – 2521, the protagonist, is a freethinker, living in a slave state. The state requires blind obedience to its decrees, which he refuses to render. The collectivism of this society explains why Equality 7–2521 cannot

think. If an individual must serve an all-powerful state, it requires obedience from him. Collectivism values a blind, unquestioning allegiance—a willingness to follow orders unthinkingly. The Councils are in no danger from the mindless brutes of a society, with harnessed backs for manual labour. The Councils must fear only one for the freethinking mind.

In *Anthem*, over the Portals of the Palace of the World Council, there were words on marble:

“We are one in all and all in one. There are no men but only the great WE, one, indivisible and forever”. (Rand: 19)

Equality 7–2521 wanted to study, because he liked the science of things but the Council did not allow him to do so. Equality 7–2521 wanted to be in the Home of the Scholars because he had a quick thinking mind and deep interest in science of things with which he wanted to contribute to the society. He had a wish to “know”, but when presented before the Council of Vocations, he was sent to the Home of the street sweeper.

A striking aspect of this society’s war on the individual is its use of plural pronouns in language, its eradication of all singular first–person reference such as “I” or “me”. By extirpating these words, the rulers have removed the possibility of even thinking in individualistic terms. From infancy, children should think and speak of themselves only as “we”. They cannot know such a concept as “I”. They know of “unspeakable word”, that to discover and speak that word is death, but they do not know what it is. Here, the characters do not use singular pronouns, “I”, “He”, “She”, instead they use “we”, “They”.

“It is a fearful word, alone the laws say that none among men may be alone, ever and at any time, for this is the great transgression and the root of all evil.” (Rand: 17)

In *Anthem* (1937), Rand shows Equality 7–2521, to have greater independence than his brothers and sisters. He refuses to bow and obediently follow the way that most embers of this society do. Similarly, International 4–8818, is willing to think for himself. He makes drawing, against the rules and despite his punishment, he refuses to inform of Equality 7–2521, though his silence violates all the laws. The Golden one, with her head high and her eyes scornful, also reveals an uncompromising moral character that stands out in this society. Equality 7–2521’s independence is further visible in his wondering regarding the Unmentionable Times and especially, the Unspeakable Word. Unlike his brothers, he is not afraid to explore and to ask questions that others would not dare to.

“There is fear hanging in the air of the streets. Fear walks through the city, fear without name, and fear without shape. All men feel it and none dare to speak.”(Rand: 46).

Personal values are critical to understand, why members of this society are unhappy, why some cry for no apparent reason, and why others scream uncontrollably in the night. An individual’s happiness depends on an ability to pursue and attain values, those things are personally important to that individual. Equality 7–2521, who loves science, is joyous when beneath the ground pursuing the studies is so meaningful to him. But this society stifles an individual’s freedom to pursue personal values, so its citizens experience life as meaningless and painful, which is why Fraternity cries, and Solidarity screams in the night. Consciously, they have no knowledge of individuality and personal values, but at an emotional level, they experience the drab dreariness of a life devoid of meaning. They get suffocated in an airtight society and gasp for breath.

In his research, Equality 7–2521, has discovered the long lost knowledge of this energy, the electricity that, as he accurately surmises, was known to thinkers of the Unmentionable Times. Equality 7–2521, is akin to pioneers of the electric age as Thomas Edison, Nikola Tesla, and George Westinghouse. Like these great thinkers of an earlier age, Equality 7–2521 is an innovator, a man who develops new ideas. Unlike them, he lives in a collectivist dictatorship that threatens his life for the “crime” of freethinking. Equality 7–2521 and the Golden one discover the meaning of love in a society utterly devoid of it. Love, as Ayn Rand shows, is a response to personal values. Equality 7–2521, thinker, scientist, man who values his own independent judgement over unthinking conformity of the crowd. He values this quality in others, such as his friend, Independence 4–8818 who makes drawings even though it is forbidden for all except those at the Home of the Artists. Similarly, he values the proud posture and haughty demeanour of the Golden one because these outer characteristics indicate a spirit that refuses to obey. Her independence of spirit, even more than her physical beauty, attracts Equality 7–2521. Equality 7–2521, values scientific research and the independent mind that

conducts the quest for timeless truth. The herd of conformists, who have relinquished their minds to the states, are incapable of experiencing this profoundly personal emotion. Love involves an individual casting an inner verdict of “Yes” on another man and woman. To pass such a judgement requires a sense of self and of what one considers personally important. When Equality 7–2521, rediscovers Electricity, his expressions were:

“We made it, we created it. We brought it forth from the rights of the ages. We alone. Our hands. Our mind. Ours alone and only” (Rand: 59).

Equality 7–2521 can be thought of as the Thomas Edison of his age, the man who discovers how to employ the power of electricity to generate light. But the conditions under which he conducts his research are more difficult. He receives no moral support from his society – only its opposite, the threat of punishment and death if caught. The harsh conditions under which Equality 7–2521 carries out his work underscore an important truth regarding innovators: they are solely motivated by their love of the work. Through the character of Equality and discovery of Electricity, Ayn Rand shows that creative work is personal, not social. When personal values are extirpated from an individual’s life, he or she cannot engage in creative work. She moves one step closer to recognize the reality of individuality, that human beings are not mere appendages of a faceless, social mass. Equality 7–2521, is almost ready to throw off the tyranny of “we”, and to discover the lost and sacred Unspeakable Word. Equality 7–2521 knows that if the state discovers the full extent of his “crimes”—his illicit scientific research and invention of an electric light—he will be executed and his creation destroyed. The legal authorities will not understand the significance of the light nor will they care. They will see only the refusal to conform. Equality 7–2521 has the only hope of being with the scholars. He believes, that the scholars are honest seekers after truth, who will both understand and care about the electric light.

“We shall go to this council and we shall lay before them, as our gift, the glass box with the power of the sky . . . . They will see, understand and forgive. For our gift is greater than transgression.” (Rand: 61)

Equality’s innocent confidence that the scholars would understand and support his invention of the light is misplaced. Despite the horrors of life in his society, he believes that the authorities are committed to human life. They are sincere and would respect his invention of electricity and would use electricity for everyone’s benefits. Ayn Rand shows that the collectivists authorities do not care about the light or the benefits it will bring; they desire neither inventions nor prosperity, what they desire is obedience. The scholars did recognize that the light is real, not a fantasy, they also know that the power is harnessed and under control, not a raging threat. They recognize the light’s potential but they concede that it will put the candle out of business. Rather they do not want the light, the change, the development. They do not want the light because they fear its source: the independent mind. They fundamentally repudiate a man who thinks for himself and who refuses to conform to society. Ayn Rand believes in the heroic potential of humans. Although Equality 7–2521 has never hunted game or cooked a meal, he is a rational man and possesses the capacity to learn, to question, to seek, to accept, the truth. Human beings have often reached difficult goals under arduous circumstances. They have circum-navigated the globe, traversed the polar ice caps, and climbed Mt. Everest.

Individuals with less genius and will to live than Equality 7–2521, have survived emergencies and catastrophes. Equality 7–2521’s willingness to face all dangers and to learn new skills reminds of the human potential. Long ago, Aristotle defined human kind as the rational animal and Equality 7–2521—the inventor, independent thinker is an example of how much a rational man is able to accomplish by use of his own mind. Ayn Rand continues her theme of independent thinking and personal values in another form.

Love is one such value because human beings are denied individuality in this society, they know no love. The state understands that love is preference, the valuing of one individual over all others. To stamp out individuality, the collectivist authorities must forbid love, which is why procreation is controlled by the state. In deciding who sleeps with whom and when, the authorities ensure that men and women are prohibited from making choices based on their own values.

“And we take no heed of the law which says that men may not think of women, save at the Time of Mating. This is the time each spring when all the men older than twenty and all the women older than eighteen are sent for one night to the City Palace of Mating. And each of

the men have one of the women assigned to them . . . . children are born each winter, but women never see their children.” (Rand: 41)

The protagonist’s – Equality 7–2521’s quest for knowledge is also personal. The society disapproves the questions he asks regarding both science and philosophy. His passion for truth drives him. His is the mind of a great thinker, determined to understand, fearless regarding the consequences. His attempt to identify the “Unspeakable Word” – the forbidden thought that would explain so much – comes close to fruition.

Their discovery of a home surviving from the Unmentionable Times is significant because it links them in physical action, as well as in spirit, to the attainment of the lost era. The home expressed a kinship existing between him and the freethinkers of the past who had achieved such lofty achievements. By finding and occupying a home from the forgotten era, Equality and the Golden One not only derive practical benefits from the lost advances but also immerse themselves in the world they seek to re-create. The great thinker who re-invents electric light links himself inextricably with the independent thinkers of the past who originally created it. He realizes that the books in the home can provide the knowledge possessed by those of the Unmentionable Times, secrets lost for the centuries. His decision to study the books is a continuation of his crusade to gain both scientific understanding of the nature and a moral and philosophical understanding of humankind. His research into the “power of sky” and his harnessing of electricity to create light are obvious examples of his scientific discoveries. But his philosophizing is of even greater importance. He is one of the few in his society who searches for the Unspeakable Word and for the precious knowledge represented by this word.

“May knowledge come to us! What is the secret our heart has understood and yet will not reveal to us, although it seems to beat as if it were endeavouring to tell it?” (Rand: 93)

Equality 7–2521 and Golden One are finally freed from the collectivist society when they discover the word “I”. The emotional power of the chapter is noteworthy. Until this point in the story, there have been pages of unrelenting collectivism. Till now, there is a world which all shreds of individuality have been ruthlessly extirpated, in which the word “we” is the only form of first person reference known and in which the group holds unquestioned dominion over an individual’s life. Now, as Equality 7–2521 opens the chapter with the words, “I am, I think, I will”, the impact of these words is profound. Equality 7–2521 has been liberated in a way far more fundamental than his physical escape. He is finally freed from the collectivist philosophy with which he has been indoctrinated all his life.

“It is my eyes which see, and the sight of my eyes grants beauty to the earth. It is my ears which hear, and the hearing of my ears gives its song to the world. It is my mind which thinks, and the judgement of my mind is the only search light that can find the truth. It is my will which chooses, and the choice of my will is the only edict I must respect..... Many words have been granted me, and some are wise, and some are false, but only three are holy: “I will it” . . . . . “My happiness is not the means to any end. It is the end. It is own goal. It is its own purpose”. (Rand : 94 – 95)

The great realisation for Equality 7–2521 is when he discovers “I am a man”. He further explains individuality and creative power of an individual thus:

“I am a man. This miracle of me is mine to own and keep, and mine to guard, and mine to use, and mine to kneel before!” (Rand: 95)

Ayn Rand, through the intellectual discoveries of the hero, provides a philosophical explanation, “I” represents the fundamental truth about human being’s nature. A human’s mind and spirit are personal attributes; they do not belong to others and are not communal property. A person’s innermost thoughts–hopes, dreams, values, aspirations, loves–belong exclusively to that person. These thoughts are the priceless items that give life its meaning and are not to be seized by others for any purpose whatever. If the content of a person’s mind is to be dictated by the state, no human life is possible, only the existence of a worker in an unrelenting toil to the colony. The “I”: or self, is sacred and must be preserved at all costs.

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