

Politics and Philosophy of Ayn Rand
POLS 1823P
Tues 4:00–6:20pm J. Walter Wilson 303

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Course Description

This seminar will examine the political and philosophical thought of Ayn Rand (1905–1982). We will begin with her political ideology and continue to the philosophical foundations she claims justify that ideology. The latter quarter of the seminar will explore applications of her philosophy to foreign affairs, religion, current events, and areas of student interest. Our sources will include Rand's non-fiction essays, her novel *Atlas Shrugged*, the main exposition of her work *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, and criticisms by Robert Nozick and others.

Course Goals

By the end of the course, you should be able to understand the essential elements of Ayn Rand's political ideology and how she defends it with moral and epistemological arguments. You should have gained significant practice in critically analyzing multi-disciplinary philosophical arguments and attacks on them. You should have improved your skill in debating and discussing with peers contentious but important topics. You should have reached your own thoughtfully considered evaluations of which, if any, of Rand's doctrines and arguments are correct.

Course Material

We will draw primarily from Rand's non-fiction essays, but we will be aided by her novel *Atlas Shrugged*, by the exposition of her philosophy, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, written by her student Leonard Peikoff, and by attacks on her philosophy from analytic philosophers, Christian writers, and others. Especially in the latter few weeks, as we see what students' interests are, we'll bring in more current work in Objectivist studies and more current attacks.

Course grade

Your course grade will be based as follows on class preparation and participation and on three papers of 900–1100 words each.

- $\frac{1}{3}$ Class preparation and participation
- $\frac{1}{6}$ Paper #1
- $\frac{1}{4}$ Paper #2
- $\frac{1}{4}$ Paper #3

I retain the discretion to put more weight on later work for students who improve significantly. You should be judged on what you know when you leave the course, not on what you know when you enter it.

You get to pick the topics of the papers but plan to discuss the topics with me first. The papers will not require any reading outside what you do for the classes, though such outside research will be welcome if your topic warrants it.

Grades

I do not consider it the mark of a good teacher when a significant number of the students fail to master the material. So I have no reservation about giving all As and in fact some kind of A is what most of my students get. On the other hand, I usually teach smaller classes and so have plenty of time to spot a problem and help each student improve. In a class this large I can't be as proactive with each student. If you want an A for the course and you are getting B or C interim grades, you'll have to take the initiative. Seek me out and find out what you can do to improve. If you are finding it hard to participate in class, ask me to call on you more often. If I give you criticism you do not understand, ask for more information.

The concepts in this course are not difficult. Wide and deep prior knowledge is not required. The reading can be heavy, and I demand critical thinking and well-argued writing, but any Brown student interested in Ayn Rand in particular, or just political theory, ethical philosophy, or philosophy in general, willing to budget the time to read carefully and write persuasively, and committed to coming to every class prepared can do well in this course.

Contacting me

I don't maintain regular on-campus office hours, but will make myself available as much as you need. I am nearly always on email. In class, I'll give you my home and cell phone numbers. You can use the second for texting me.

Class preparation and participation

When I say that $\frac{1}{3}$ of your grade is for class preparation and participation, I'm serious. I do not mean class attendance, I mean preparation and participation. One of my goals is to help you practice thinking on your feet about complex and charged topics. Whatever career you choose, that is a skill you will want to have.

If you write all A papers but never engage in the class discussion, you will not get an A in the course. But also, I am looking for quality of preparation not quantity of participation. You do not need to be a pushy big-mouth. You can be reserved and naturally quiet. But you need to show me, *in every one of our meetings*, that you have read and thought about the assignments, and you must be ready, *in every one of our meetings*, to engage in analytical discussion with me and your classmates. I will make sure everyone has the opportunity to do so.

Clearly, missing class will be a problem. But if you are sick and you are contagious or coming to class interferes with getting better, don't come to class. If you must miss class for that or any other reason, let me know as soon as possible. Expect that I will ask you to find some way to make up what you missed.

No, you cannot skip class on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. If you know you will need to, don't take the course.

Workload and Pace

There is a lot of reading and you must do it all. For each class, you'll need to read and come prepared to discuss twenty to forty pages of primary-source material, some of which will be very taxing. In addition, you have to read a 1069-page novel and finish it by the tenth week. So plan to read at least 100 pages of the novel each week starting right away. Overall, the reading won't be difficult. There is just a lot of it and you need to do it all. The workload is heaviest in the middle weeks and light the last few. Plan ahead for the papers. Do not try to write them at the last minute. There is no final exam.

Books

You need to buy

- The course reader.
- Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, preferably the 50th Anniversary Edition (Penguin, 1996; ISBN 9780451191144).
- Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*
- Michael Harvey, *The Nuts and Bolts of College Writing* (Hackett, 2003).

Finally

I consider past student evaluations of my courses and the comments available at www.ratemyprofessors.com and www.johnmccaskey.com to be fair. If they are, you will find me supportive but demanding (especially in class engagement and in the quality of your writing), the readings thought-provoking, classroom meetings stimulating and fun, and the course overall very rewarding. I'll do all I can to ensure you do.

Assignments

In addition to the detailed assignments below, I also want you to read Michael Harvey's *The Nuts and Bolts of College Writing*. In fact, I want you to read it repeatedly throughout your writing career. I do. It's only 85 pages. The wiser students will have read much of it before the first paper is due.

The class will be conducted as a seminar, not a lecture. You must read the assigned material **before** classes. Come ready to discuss it. I and your fellow students will assume we can, without warning, ask you to jump into the conversation.

There will be more reading than we can fully discuss in class. Expect to do much of your learning for this course on your own, reading, and considering the assignments.

Part I. Preconceptions about Rand. Themes in Her Philosophy.

Class 1: Tuesday, September 10. Structure and syllabus for the course. Introduction to Ayn Rand and themes in her writing. Discussion of preconceptions and prior exposure to Rand.

Part II. Rand's Political Ideology.

Class 2: Tuesday, September 17. Nature of Government

Read a few chapters of *Atlas Shrugged*.

Before class, read and prepare to discuss:

- Peikoff, chapter 10, "Government."
- Ayn Rand, "Nature of Government."
http://www.aynrand.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ari_ayn_rand_the_nature_of_government

Class 3: Tuesday, September 24. Capitalism

Read a few chapters of *Atlas Shrugged*.

Before class, read and prepare to discuss:

- Ayn Rand, "Man's Rights."
http://www.aynrand.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ari_ayn_rand_man_rights
- Ayn Rand, "Collectivized Rights."
http://www.aynrand.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ari_ayn_rand_collectivized_rights
- United Nations' "Universal Declaration of Human Rights."
<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

Class 4: Tuesday, October 1. Morality of Capitalism

Read a few chapters of *Atlas Shrugged*.

Before class, read and prepare to discuss:

- Peikoff, chapter 11, "Capitalism."
- Ayn Rand, "The Martyrdom of the Industrialist," *Atlas Shrugged*, 420–22.
- Ayn Rand, "The Moral Meaning of Capitalism," *Atlas Shrugged*, 475–82.
- Ayn Rand, selections from *The Fountainhead*, in course reader.
- Ayn Rand, "Conservatism: An Obituary," in course reader.

Class 5: Tuesday, October 8. *Atlas Shrugged*, Part 1

You need to have read at least through Part 1 of *Atlas Shrugged*. Prepare to discuss it in class.

Friday after Class 5: First paper is due.

Part III. Rand's Philosophical Defense of Her Political Ideology

Class 6: Tuesday, October 15. Ethics as Foundation for Political Ideology

Read a few chapters of *Atlas Shrugged*.

Before class, read and prepare to discuss:

- John W. Robbins, "The *Sine Qua Non* of Enduring Freedom," in the course reader.
- Dinesh D'Souza, "The Civilization of Selfishness," <http://dineshdsouza.com/articles/selfishness.html>.
- Ayn Rand, "Introduction," *The Virtue of Selfishness*, in course reader.

Class 7: Tuesday, October 22. Selfishness as a Virtue

Read a few chapters of *Atlas Shrugged*.

Before class, read and prepare to discuss this essay from *The Virtue of Selfishness*:

- Ayn Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics."
http://www.aynrand.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ari_ayn_rand_the_objectivist_ethics

Class 8: Tuesday, October 29. Rand's Distinctive Style of Arguing: Objectivist Epistemology

Read a few chapters of *Atlas Shrugged*.

Before class, read and prepare to discuss:

- Peikoff, chapter 4, "Objectivity."

Using the Ayn Rand Lexicon (www.aynrandlexicon.com), consider and prepare to discuss thinking practices that Rand calls fallacies.

Class 9: Tuesday, November 5. Attacks on Rand as Epistemological

Read a few chapters of *Atlas Shrugged*.

Before class, read and prepare to discuss:

- Robert Nozick, "On the Randian Argument," in course reader.
- Michael Huemer, "Why I am Not an Objectivist."
<http://spot.colorado.edu/~huemer/rand.htm>

- Excerpts from John W. Robbins, *Without A Prayer: Ayn Rand And The Close Of Her System*. I have obtained free copies of this book and will hand them out to you.

Using whatever material you can find, prepare to discuss what philosophers call the “is-ought gap.” We will discuss Rand’s claim that she has bridged it.

Class 10: November 12. *Atlas Shrugged*, Part 1

You need to have read at least through Part 2 of *Atlas Shrugged*. Prepare to discuss it in class.

Friday after Class 10: Second paper is due.

Part IV: Application of Objectivism

Class 11: November 19. Force, Faith and Religion

Read a few chapters of *Atlas Shrugged*.

Before class, read and prepare to discuss:

- Ayn Rand, “Faith and Force: The Destroyers of the Modern World,” in course reader.
- Ayn Rand, “Requiem for Man,” in course reader.

Class 12: November 26. Application of Objectivism to Topics of Interest

Read a few chapters of *Atlas Shrugged*.

This week, we’ll study the application of Rand’s political ideology and her philosophy to topics of interest to students. Possibilities:

- The poor and needy
- Discrimination
- Topics that we’ll earlier have said she thinks are outside government’s purview
- Marginal, borderline, and difficult cases
- Foreign policy

Class 13: December 3. *Atlas Shrugged*.

Finish the novel and prepare to discuss it.

Class 14: December 10. An Optional Meeting.

For any students that want to, we can meet to discuss other topics related to Rand and Objectivism, but that are outside the goals of the course. Possible topics include:

- Rand’s philosophy of art
- Rand’s presence and influence in American politics, especially lately
- Rand’s presence in academia
- Organizations, disputes, and directions in Objectivist scholarship
- More on technical topics

When our final exam would be held: Third paper is due

There is no final exam.