

A declaration of existentialism



**ASSIGN
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Ayn Rand's unflinching political confutation for socialism conveyed throughout her mighty work *Atlas Shrugged* is a passionate allegorical account regarding how one should exist only for the benefit of oneself. This idea is expressed through an assortment of Rand's main characters, though none quite so explicitly as Hank Rearden. "The public good be damned, I will have no part of it!" In Rearden's bold refutation of 'public good' at his trial, Rearden is dismissing the core ideology of socialism and declaring himself an existentialist member of society.

At the novel's start, Hank Rearden is a simple man trying to make a name for himself in the metal industry so that he can support his family. He lives to content his unappeasable wife Lillian, an antagonist to the story's existentialist themes, and finds no happiness in his interactions with her. We first understand Lillian's main role as villainous wife when Rearden gifts her with the first piece of his metal crafted into a bracelet for her to wear. She dismisses his loving act, and this is the first instance where Rearden is seen as a lesser (41). Lillian's main purpose in the novel is to help characterize Rearden's conciliatory persona and demonstrate his initial inability to be egotistic. Selfishness, as viewed by Rand, is a positive trait that leads to the success in business and personal affairs. Rearden finally acts upon selfish desires when he falls in love with Dagny Taggart shortly after his wife's discontent with his metal bracelet. The affair between Rearden and Dagny is selfish on both ends, but that is the reason why it makes them both so happy.

"I am proud that [Hank] has chosen me to give him pleasure and that it was he who had been my choice. It was not – as it is for most of you – an act of

casual indulgence and mutual contempt. It was the ultimate form of our admiration for each other, with full knowledge of the values by which we made our choice..." (318).

In the above quote articulated by Dagny when referencing his relations with Hank Rearden, she explains how being with each other was each of their own individual choices. Rearden chose Dagny to pleasure himself and vice versa; there were no outside forces pressuring them together other than the pure admiration for one another that Dagny references. Through this, Rand is demonstrating that by disregarding the good of others and focusing on the pleasure of oneself, great things will emerge. Rearden does not understand this concept prior to his relationship with Dagny, but finally has an egotistical epiphany at his trial where he disputes the good of others and suggests existing for the good of himself.

Hank's statement, "The public good be damned, I will have no part of it!" references the two coinciding themes of existentialism and egoism. The idea of existentialism, existing for oneself instead of for the greater good of others, is conveyed through several different outlets throughout Rand's work. By supporting capitalism and shooting down communist principles, she expresses the importance of this theme. Public good, as Rand sees it, aims to work toward the greater benefit of a community by taking from others, while existentialism strives for the success of one's self. This is key, as the looters take from those who are stronger. By boasting these words in such a public environment, the character experiences a shift where he goes from submission to the powerful figures that aim to control his success to breaking out and declaring his individualist existence. As his trial

commences, the judge questions where Rearden's absent defense is. Rearden replies, " I will not play the part of defending myself, where no defense is possible, and I will not simulate the illusion of dealing with a tribunal of justice" (442). With this statement, he is refusing to conform to the expectations of the government and society, proving this point by standing on his own in court. Although he realizes he alone cannot fight the power that the government will exert on him, he makes it very clear to the judge that he does not acknowledge nor believe in any of the principles for which he is being tried for. The purpose of the publicity of this declaration is to demonstrate his opposition to the principles of socialism in a manner that can be heard by all. This is Rand's way of communicating her philosophy through this growing character.

Rand also develops the philosophies of egoism and reason through Hank Rearden. Rand once stated that an " individual should exist for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself" (Duignan). This goes hand in hand with the ideas of existentialism portrayed by Rearden as the novel progresses. Existentialism is the core concept of the valley many of the characters find themselves in climatically. In order to stay in the valley, an individual must pledge an oath stating " I swear by my life and my love of it that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine" (670). This captures the central idea of Hank's quote, simply rephrased.

To conclude, Rearden's dismissal of public good brings the novel to a climax point; this is where Hank declares his realization that he is living for himself, and not to please anyone, including the government and his dreadful wife

Lillian. By Ayn Rand highlighting this outspoken epiphany, she is declaring her own beliefs encouraging capitalism and discouraging the idea that one must exist for the greater good of the community. After all of Rand's awful experiences with communism, she is showing that being an existentialist is the only way to true success and happiness.