

Ask Aristotle ... Favorites!

Q: "Why was it morally right for Dagny Taggart to murder the guard in Atlas Shrugged?"

A: Before I can answer this question, we must first define our terms. Let us be clear on both the definition of the word murder and its context for this case. According to The American Heritage Dictionary, murder is the unlawful killing of another person. If we stop here, with only the definition to guide us, then we are still left with the open-ended question of "what is lawful" and furthermore "what is a legitimate legal code."

Beginning with the first of these-without getting to involved in legal science-it is common in western culture (and rightfully so) that it is legal to take a life if it is in self-defense or in defense of another person in response to the initiation of the use of force. Objectivism fully supports this idea and I will treat it as a given for the purposes of this discussion, because I believe it is safe to assume that you and our readers understand at least this much concerning the concepts of individual rights and the use of force. I will also assume that you are in agreement with me up to this point-if not, then you do not believe in an individuals right to his own life and there is nothing further to say.

This brings us to the second question: What about a legal code that does not recognize a man's right to defend himself (i.e., does not have the right to his own life)? Such a code is not a moral code because it is not based on the requirements of Man's survival. In Objectivism, morality is determined by Man's nature and what is proper for Man to survive qua Man. A legitimate society is one that recognizes this fact and establishes a code of law accordingly. Therefore "murder," for a society that does not recognize a man's right to life, would be a stolen concept. In the philosophical context of the word, murder can never be moral. Therefore, to imply that Dagny's action was both moral and an act of murder is a contradiction. The proper question-if it is not an act of murder-is "why was it moral for Dagny to kill the guard?" I.e., why is it NOT murder?

Let's take a look at Dagny's situation in this scene. John Galt, the man she loves and her highest external value, is being held prisoner by a dictatorial government and his life is in danger. Dagny is there to rescue him. Standing between her and her highest value is the guard in question-an agent of the oppressive government that does not recognize an individual's right to life. In order to save John Galt, Dagny must get past this obstacle. As she explains, "because it's your body that's barring my way."

But what if the guard is an innocent victim who is just following orders? To this I say "Just following orders" is never an excuse and anybody who uses this as their only defense is not innocent. In this case, what does it mean to be "following orders?" It means that one is part of the hierarchical structure of an organization. To the extent that a person is free to enlist or not-i.e., he is not being forced at the point of a gun-then that person is guilty of

sanctioning the overall goals and philosophy of that organization, he has chosen to act on their behalf for their ends, he has pledged his agreement with their agenda.

If and when an organization begins to change its fundamental philosophy and commit actions that are immoral, then the proper response is to discontinue one's association with it. In the case of the guard, he should have turned in his weapon long ago and declared that he would have no part of this. If the consequences of doing so involved a threat to his own life, then he needs to realize-just as our forefathers did-that life under a dictatorship is not a proper way of life. He should sooner choose to fight for his life and liberty than surrender it to a subhuman existence. But he did not make this choice. That is now his problem, not Dagny's. The fact that he has made the wrong choice makes him her enemy.

Now let us ask the question "what if the guard is an innocent victim who does not know what the circumstances are?" Suppose Dagny tells him. Suppose she explains that an innocent man is being held captive and that his life is in danger. Would this make a difference? How could it? When Dagny gives him a choice to step aside or die, the guard is incapable of making a decision. If he cannot identify the facts of reality and come to a decision when his own life hangs in the balance, why should she expect him to react differently for the life of someone he does not even know?

Fundamentally, there is only one life each man should be concerned with and that is his own. And to concern oneself with his life means to take the necessary actions required to live. How does the guard's philosophy coincide with this idea? Ayn Rand uses this scene as a literary device to illustrate an important philosophical point, a point that is a recurring theme throughout the novel. This is the idea that Man's life depends on his ability to think for himself and exercise his own judgment. When faced with making a decision or losing his life, the guard is still not capable of thinking for himself. Ayn Rand intends to concretize this point when she writes of how Dagny "pulled the trigger and fired straight at the heart of a man who had wanted to exist without the responsibility of consciousness."

If a proper code of morality is based on the requirements of Man's survival, then which of these characters was acting morally? The guard who could not make the simplest decision to save his own life and barred the way for Dagny to save the life of John Galt? Or Dagny, who took every action possible and necessary to further her life and save the life of the man she loves? Yes, it was moral for Dagny to kill the guard and the reason why is because it was self-defense, not murder.

Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle

Q: "Dear Aristotle,

My [question] is derived from this comment you made when addressing the issue of Dagny killing the guard:

"If and when an organization begins to change its fundamental philosophy and commit actions that are immoral, then the proper response is to discontinue one's association with it. In the case of the guard, he should have turned in his weapon long ago and declared that he would have no part of this."

Could this not be said for our current (USA) police force? (It could be said about the entire welfare state as well... but who wants to have their life ruined by refusing to support such policies [with our tax dollars]?) How much of the police force's time, money, and manpower is spent on immoral activities such as the "war on drugs" that violate individual rights and move us closer to a totalitarian state? I'd be willing to bet it is more than 50% of the budget if fixed administrative costs are deducted first. Care to take the other side?

Given this, can a rational and moral individual work for the police force? My thought is that if working in a legitimate and necessary unit ([e.g.,] homicide) yes, but if transferred to a non legitimate unit such as narcotics, you would have to quit."

A: I would have to agree for the most part with how you have answered your own question. As a police officer, one should refrain from joining departments such as the vice squad if at all possible. My only contention is that most police officers are patrol men and are not necessarily part of a specific unit. In the line of duty these men have to enforce all laws including arresting people for drug use, drug possession, and other victimless crimes. Also, even men in legitimate departments such as homicide are obligated to uphold these laws.

So how does one reconcile this? One must first realize that our police force, despite the many flaws of our legal system, is primarily an agency necessary for insuring our liberty and for establishing order as opposed to anarchy. It is not an agency devoted to the violation of rights as such. While it is true that laws against drugs, prostitution, etc. are immoral, they are not primary threats to life and freedom.

People who commit these crimes are in no mortal danger by complying with such laws. These criminals know the laws they are breaking and choose to break them anyway not for the furtherance of their lives, but despite the obvious danger that exists should they get caught. I do not mean to imply that they deserve what they get. I fully agree that such laws are immoral. But the disvalue that comes from having to comply with these laws is insignificant by comparison to the immeasurable value we receive by having a police force.

The fact remains that we are still free to speak out against these laws--even if one is a police officer. A member of the police force who must enforce these laws is completely moral so long as he is opposed to them and works within the system to change them. The guard in Atlas Shrugged was part of an entirely different context. It would not have been proper for Dagny to have shot him if John Galt was merely being held for drug possession and was in no mortal danger. But this was not the context. The guard was part of a socialist Nazi-like regime, John Galt's crime was that he would not sacrifice his life, and he was in mortal danger.

I want to stress that I fully agree that laws against victimless crimes are immoral. But these are not a reason to disassociate from the police or military. These two agencies are legitimate functions of government and open rebellion against them is the last resort. Only when our society has fallen into a totalitarian police state where people are not free to work within the system will it be proper to openly rebel and for the moral members of the police and military to quit and take up arms in opposition.

But by definition, this is revolution. And a revolution is not something people start just because they want to smoke dope and buy hookers. One starts a revolution when rights are being violated at a much more fundamental level.

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "Do you agree with Aristotle's view that all moral virtue is a mean between the extremes of excess and deficiency? What about the virtues of honesty and love?"

A: This is a very good question. In "Nicomachean Ethics" I explained how virtues cannot be prescribed exactly, but must avoid excess and defect. Quite often, my discussion of this point has been distorted and taken out of context. For example, in one instance, a modern day feminist, Jill Vickers, attempted to defend her views on socialism when she said, "As Aristotle said, all things in moderation." Thankfully, Leonard Peikoff corrected her by pointing out that I never said "all things in moderation" and then used an analogy of a healthy diet tempered with poison to illustrate.

As I hope you will see, my discussion must be taken in the proper context. When I discussed the excess and the defect of various virtues with respect to their mean, I in no way advocated tempering the application of any particular virtue with its opposite. In my discussion of the virtue of honesty for example, I did not suggest that being honest should be limited by practicing a certain amount of dishonesty. My discussions dealt not with the extremes (e.g., always honest vs. always dishonest), but rather with the misapplications of a particular virtue. To continue using the example regarding honesty, the misapplications of this virtue are that of boastfulness and false modesty. In this case, the extreme at the top end of the spectrum to be avoided is that of boastfulness. That is, constantly going around bragging about oneself when not solicited. If the virtues of which you speak are true, they will be evident. This is not the same as advocating that one should lie. (Perhaps there was something lost in the translation of my works from their original language to English.)

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "If the written word can be made to speak, what becomes of the metalogical relationship between speech and text?"

A: Is "metalogical" even a word? The relationship between speech and text is that, in both instances, they are symbols denoting concepts. Only their form is different. Therefore, the phrase "the written word can be made to speak," is merely a poetic way of saying that one is translating from one mode of communication to another.

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "How do you account for evil people getting ahead in the world?"

A: This would depend on what you mean by "getting ahead." Certainly it is true that an evil person can succeed at a particular goal. For instance, a killer can succeed at killing a particular person. But no evil person ever amounts to or achieves anything substantial. What examples do you have of such people "getting ahead?" Perhaps you have a differing view of what constitutes evil.

Furthermore, if one truly believes that evil is potent, one must have a very cynical and malevolent view of the world and life in general. Such a person must see nothing but injustice. Why is this? Either one chooses to focus on the negative and does not see the good around him, or one has an inverted view of what constitutes justice and evil. Perhaps this person envies those who have gotten ahead by legitimate means and takes offense at the fact that they have succeeded where he has not. Objectivism holds that evil is basically impotent and that those who do get ahead (by any proper definition of this phrase) did so because they earned it.

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "Does possession negate desire?"

A: No. Once one possesses that which one desires, the desire to obtain the object becomes the desire to retain it. The concept desire goes hand in hand with the concept of value, which Ayn Rand defined as that which one acts to gain or keep. If desire could be negated by possession, then action would cease, one would stagnate, and all that would be left would be the antithesis of life.

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "If, as Heinlein says, peace and freedom are mutually exclusive concepts, how can we expect to evolve into any sort of reasonable society?"

A: Your first mistake is to take anything that Heinlein says as a given, not to be questioned. Check your premises. Peace and freedom are NOT mutually exclusive concepts. Any disruption of peace is a disruption of peace precisely because it is a threat to freedom. If one must fight for his freedom, it is not his desire for freedom that caused a disruption in the peace. The disruption was that which threatened his freedom in the first place. Those who take freedom away are the initiators of force. Those who defend freedom are acting in self-defense. If one believes otherwise, then one has inverted justice and morality, has condemned the victim and sanctioned the criminal, has disarmed the advocates of freedom and provided dictators with the ammunition to enslave all. After all, men like Fidal Castro merely want and advocate a peaceful and orderly state, while our Founding Fathers were nothing more than disrupters of the peace who should have left well enough alone. Contrary to Heinlein's belief, peace and freedom are symbiotic concepts. One does not exist without the other.

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "Can a philosopher be a sports fan?"

A: Of course! They are no more mutually exclusive than peace and freedom!

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "How is being a Libertarian any different than being an anarchist?"

A: Fundamentally, they are no different. When, as with the Libertarians, one believes that government is a "necessary evil" one has laid the foundation for why government should be dissolved altogether. Regardless of its alleged necessity, if one believes it to be evil, then there are only two choices: any government will do, or no government at all. Those who believe that government is evil now have a sanction to run willy-nilly and will make every attempt to prove that no government in particular or any government at all is in fact necessary.

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "Ah, Aristotle, it is such a pleasure. I can't believe I finally have the chance to talk to you. Please forgive me while I present a question somewhat less than philosophy related; yet while it is perhaps a bit trivial, I'm sure you'll find it is a question you have asked yourself repeatedly over the past couple of months: How on Earth did the Los Angeles Kings beat the Detroit Red Wings in the NHL playoffs? I mean really, HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?"

A: Ah! Sports! The honorary 6th branch of philosophy!

I attribute it to an overall breakdown in their defensive game combined with a lack of physical play, including their refusal to challenge the puck by finishing hits along the boards. In addition, they did not capitalize on many opportunities to score by choosing to pass rather than shoot (I can't stress enough the importance of one-timers on the net). Overall, they just got complacent and too conservative. However, I cannot take anything away from L.A. either. They were very physical, played with much enthusiasm, and had more desire to the point that they looked like they might be the giant killers who could go all the way (just look at how hard they played Colorado in the 2nd round).

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "If we are born without morals, what makes us acquire them? Do they develop naturally? If so, why do they differ?"

A: An explicit morality comes from the recognition that Man must have a code of conduct in order to live his life. As such, like all other forms of knowledge, it is something that must be learned (i.e., acquired by choice). And like anything else that is learned, it is subject to error. One might as well ask, "If we are born without knowledge of calculus, how does one acquire it? Does it come naturally? If so, why do people get the wrong answers to the story problems?"

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "Can good exist without evil?"

A: Contrary to the relativist position, good is not defined on a spectrum in relation to that with which it coexists (i.e., its opposite). It is defined by that which is proper for Man's survival qua Man (i.e., that which it depends on). Therefore, speaking strictly from an existence vs. non-existence viewpoint, yes. For instance, a capitalist society can in fact exist without a neighboring dictatorship. However, in terms of possibilities, no. Since Man's life

is the standard of value, and that which promotes it is good, it also follows that that which negates it is evil. While the existence of a dictatorship is not a necessity, the possibility of such is very real. As long as Man's survival is not guaranteed, both good and evil are necessary corollaries (not of each other, but of Man's life). If Man's survival were guaranteed, neither concept would have any meaning. However, it is important to note that it is not evil that makes good possible, nor vice-versa. Both exist only in relation to Man's life.

Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle

Q: "Does Objectivism advocate that man can learn whatever he puts his mind to? Can anyone become a Bill Gates? Or do some men just not have what it takes?"

A: To the extent that a man is not mentally disabled (by birth or his own hand), a man can learn whatever he puts his mind to so long as he is willing to put forth the mental effort. The mental effort does not consist exclusively of observation and of studying volumes and volumes of empirical evidence. It also consists of learning the necessary thinking skills. One must first learn how to learn. If one does not do this early in life it becomes harder later. For some it may even become impossible.

As for whether or not anyone can become a Bill Gates or if some men just don't have what it takes, this is a separate issue. I must first say that I don't like the expression "can anyone be a so-and-so." Without the proper context the phrase is nothing more than a floating abstraction. For this expression to have any meaning at all, we must explicitly state what the meaning is instead of leaving it open to interpretation. By holding up a concrete person as an example of what you are trying to achieve, you leave open for interpretation which abstractions does this person represent to you and what example the person is setting that others are supposed to follow.

For instance, are you referring to the amount of wealth he has generated? The fact that he pioneered an industry? The fact that he is the best in his industry? By definition, only one person can be the wealthiest; the first to pioneer a field; and be the best at anything. If one is to rate everyone who endeavors to do a particular thing on a scale measuring their ability to do it, you will get a continuum of the various abilities of the people being measured with only one person at the top because not all people are equal for various reasons. Not everyone puts forth the same effort, not all people have the same drive and passion, etc.

But this is not relevant. By concerning oneself with being the best, the first, or the wealthiest, one is concerning himself primarily by how he compares with others. By doing this, one will more likely become a Gail Wynand before he will become a Bill Gates. Only a second-hander places others as the standard for how he views himself.

This is not to say that there is not a legitimate comparison to make between great men such as Bill Gates (or Michael Jordan, Ayn Rand, Isaac Newton, etc.). If by "being a Bill Gates"

one means someone who is dedicated and passionate toward his career, a man devoted to his self interest, a man who takes the necessary actions to achieve the goals he desires, then yes such a comparison is valid. But it is also valid to make this comparison with other people you meet in life as well such as a coworker, friend, or relative.

Given this valid use of holding a man as a concrete standard which others should emulate, the next part of your question becomes simpler to answer. Those men who do not have what it takes, don't have it by choice. Such men have willfully chosen not to put forth the mental effort necessary to succeed at achieving their goals. They lack the will, the passion, or the degree of rationality to achieve their goals and quite often fail to set goals or they set goals that are too high and unrealistic.

Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle

Q: "Which of the following two statements are true, or comes closest to the truth?

- 1. Man should choose life because life is valuable.*
- 2. Life is valuable because man chooses life."*

A: For an answer to this question, I will have to refer you to an essay written by my good friend Eric. You can access it by clicking on the following link:

["Life and Value" by Eric J. Lakits](#)

Q: "Dear bear-nevolent Aristotle: Correct me if I am wrong. I gather that while existence exists, reality is what I perceive as existence around me. If my perception of existence is correct, my reality is an identical reflection of existence. But if my perception is impaired, my reality is flawed. From the above I make two conclusions: - reality is different for each person; - almost all through Objectivist literature and talks, the word reality should be replaced by the word existence."

A: Reality is that which exists. The two words can be used interchangeably. The fact that one's perception can be flawed does not mean that reality is different for each person. If what you perceive does not exist, then it is not real. In such a case, it is not reality that is flawed, it is your consciousness that is flawed. Just like Mr. Spock says in one of the Star Trek movies, "Nothing unreal exists."

[Follow-Up Question...] Thank you, Aristotle. Your answer is sufficient if you just state that Reality and Existence is one and the same thing. If this is a matter of definition, I cannot make an argument and any further explanations are superfluous. I will have to pay more attention when I do my further reading (or cassette listening). I still have the impression that Ayn Rand discerned between the two. If I ever see such a quote, I will come back to you. And than again, why would Ayn Rand, who was so precise and

economical with words, use two words for the same thing? I do not expect that from her.

If you have not already done so, buy "The Ayn Rand Lexicon." When you look up the work 'reality' it says "see Existence." When you go to 'existence,' the second quote by Ayn Rand is "Reality is that which exists." Yes, Ayn Rand is very economical and precise with her words, but that does not mean she did not recognize the fact that synonyms exist (are real).

Aristotle

Q: If Ayn Rand advocates the supremacy of ideas, then do you think that Objectivism should be a system of open discussion from various viewpoints or a system which is open to those who accept only the orthodox philosophy of what Ayn Rand wrote.

A: Ayn Rand did not believe in "the supremacy of ideas." She believed in the POWER of ideas and the supremacy of REASON. As such, the wrong ideas can and will lead to bad results and the right ideas can and will lead to good results.

Furthermore, Objectivism is not "a system of discussion." Robert's Rules of Order is a system of discussion. Objectivism is a fully integrated philosophy for determining what the right and wrong ideas are that will lead to either bad or good results as stated above. Therefore, people who already hold the wrong ideas cannot by definition be considered Objectivists since their ideas contradict and oppose those of Objectivism.

Lastly, I do not like your use of the word orthodox with reference to Objectivism. The American Heritage Dictionary defines Orthodox as "adhering to the accepted or traditional and established faith, esp. in religion." Since Objectivism is not a religion and nothing it advocates is expected to be accepted on faith, the use of such a word is nothing more than inflammatory.

**Your friend in reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology describes the formation of higher level concepts which are integrations or subdivisions of lower level ones. Yet not every higher level concept is an integration or subdivision of lower level ones. 'Value', for example, is higher level (it is a derivative of 'life'), but does not seem to be an integration or subdivision of any earlier concepts. Is that correct?"

A: No, it is not correct. All higher level concepts follow the pattern of being a derivative of lower level concepts including the concept 'value'. Just as the concept 'furniture' is a higher level concept subsuming the lower level concepts chair, table, couch, bed, etc., the concept 'value' subsumes all lower level concepts that are beneficial to Man's life and which he would act to gain or keep. These include food, shelter, money, friends, love, etc. The idea that 'value' is a concept that cannot be reduced to its constituent parts is the intrinsic theory of value which today's conservatives would have you believe. In their view, what constitutes value is found directly in reality without relation to Man's existence as dictated to them by God or society.

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "Most of reality can be constructed from the summation of its indefeasible parts. How then can a self-enclosed cognitive being ever truly understand the universal structure of the reality it is contemplating at any given time. Why most cerebral processes tend to be carried out in a subjective and intuitive fashion; we are all prisoners of our soamtic bodie and sensory intermediation will forever occlude our ontology. Please answer the question, and how would you respond to non-saltational evolutionary theory in the drive to understand the biogenesis of the Earth's species?"

A: Having sifted through your bombastic and pretentious predilection for pedantry, I need make manifest the fact that 'soamtic' and 'bodie' do not loom within the confines of any of my myriad dictionaries.

Having said that, reality is that which exists. It is the sum of everything that exists. All, not most, of what exists has an identity that is determined by all of the facts relevant to that entity. Consciousness is the act of grasping reality. To grasp reality, one must make contact with reality. This is done via our senses. These senses do not cut us off from reality, they bring us in contact with it. Our senses provide us data about what is out there and it is up to our conscious mind to process that data and make sense of it. The automatic "cerebral processes" of the human brain are not subjective or intuitive, they simply are. However, methods of thinking which are within a Man's ability to manipulate must be chosen, and the only proper choice is to use reason. Reason is Man's only way of dealing with reality. The fact that Man cannot know every single detail about every aspect of existence at any given time does not invalidate his ability to acquire knowledge about the universe, his own existence, or his relationship to the universe. All that Man needs to know are the facts that are relevant about an aspect of existence at any given time.

I suggest you read more of Ayn Rand's [Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology](#) and Leonard Peikoff's [Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand](#) and less of your thesaurus. The first two are much more valuable to your understanding of philosophy than the latter.

As for your second question, I fully support evolutionary theory and favor the idea of a gradual evolution without giant leaps. Gaps in the fossil record are merely indicative of the fact that the conditions that make fossilization possible are complex and do not frequently occur. As to whether or not minor leaps are possible and/or did occur, I will leave that question to the experts in evolutionary theory of which I am not one.

Your Friend in Reason, Aristotle

Q: "What's up with this?"

A: Scroll to the [top of the page](#) to find out.

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**