

Ask Aristotle ... General

Q: "Can a person remain moral and happy in a corrupt society?"

A: It is necessary to address morality and happiness separately. These concepts do not necessarily depend on the same factors. To be moral is an act of choice. Regardless of the degree of corruption within a particular society, this still remains true. A man of intransigent mind and integrity can still act according to his principles to the extent that he is free to do so. To the extent that he is not free to do so, it is no longer a question of morality since his choice has been removed from the equation.

Happiness, on the other hand, is a psychological and emotional state that depends on many factors, many of which can be overcome in any society—corrupt or otherwise—and some that may not. To remain happy in a corrupt society will depend not only on the environment, but also on the individual's ability to exist in that environment and his ability to integrate his evaluation of the society with the rest of his value hierarchy. If the individual's family or his own person is subject to torture and persecution, it may be impossible for him to be happy. If that is not the case, his happiness can result from the fact that he is certain in his own beliefs and knows that evil can eventually be defeated. Ultimately, a person's ability to be happy depends on their ability to cope with their circumstances and maintain a positive outlook on life.

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "Is a person born with shyness or do they choose to be shy?"

I have yet to obtain a girlfriend and I'm afraid I never will. Can Objectivism help me?"

A: There is currently a great deal of evidence out there to suggest that certain personality traits, such as shyness, have genetic causes. Some scientists have even claimed to have isolated a shyness gene. However, as a psychological state, it would be irresponsible to say that is the reason for every individual case. For some people, shyness could be a result of childhood trauma or other psychological factors.

In either case, it would be difficult to say that one chooses to be shy. However, it is within one's power of choice as to whether or not you yield to your shyness or conquer it. The outward manifestations of shyness, such as not asking a girl to go out on a date, are willful acts of volition. As such, however scary or uncomfortable it may be to do so, one can still overcome or confront this social anxiety by taking action. It may be difficult to ask a girl out, but it is not impossible. And believe me, the reward is worth it.

Can Objectivism help? Well it certainly can hurt! If you were to adopt Objectivism and be consistently rational, you might not even have to go through the trouble of asking a girl out. She just might make the first move when she sees what a valuable person you are. But don't wait for that to happen. One of the problems is that even though she might like you, you might not like her in the same way. The only sure way to get what you want is to identify it and go after it.

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

*Q: "After reading one of Ayn Rand's works, *The Fountainhead*, I cannot recall where she dealt with the situation of the economically dysfunctional, for example orphans, the mentally handicapped and suchlike persons. Reviewing the treatment of said persons [is] self-evidently the easy method of determining the success of a civilization.*

If Objectivism is to be truly based on self-evident precepts, I would say honesty requires the believer to admit

1) existence is difficult,

2) philosophical pondering on this fact is the highest function of an organ nobody yet understands,

3) if we did not build the pondering machine ourselves, how can we know what drives it?

By looking at the results of our freedom? It is a fact that the economically dysfunctional are only well treated in societies that do not function according to Ayn Rand's principles. Denmark, for example."

A: I'd like to take this opportunity to quote Ronald Reagan and say, "well, there you go again." Do you altruists get talking points for attacking Objectivism? It doesn't seem to matter how many times I and other Objectivists address this issue, you people keep coming back with the same nonsense.

Before I go any further, let me first say that you can find this issue addressed on page 605 of hard cover edition of *The Fountainhead*, where Roark addresses the idea of housing the poor and condemns taxes as a means to doing it. However, it is important to impress upon you that the goal of Ayn Rand's fiction writing is not to address economic and social issues. The goal of her writing is the portrayal of an ideal Man. Whatever would dysfunctional orphans have to do with the life of Howard Roark, unless your unstated motive is to tear him down to their level by making him serve them? Is that what you mean to imply—that such men have no right to exist unless and until they serve their inferiors? This is the evil motive that is revealed when one strips away the veneer of "the public good" that you altruists always use to hide your true intentions of enslaving each man to every other.

Now what can you possibly mean by "economically dysfunctional?" This is a perfect example of the fallacy of the stolen concept. I must assume that you are referring to people

who have a lower economic standing relative to others in society. But a person's economic standing in a free society is directly proportional to the degree that he is able to function. Don't you realize that these people are economically challenged precisely because they are *not functional*?

Aside from your mistaken notion of what constitutes the "self-evident" (*how can a higher level abstraction be on the same level as precepts?*), your claim that the treatment of these people is a measure of the success of a civilization is wrong on at least two accounts. First, the success of a civilization is determined by how well it protects the rights of all individuals regardless of their economic status. As is always the case with you altruists, you focus only on one group of people—the needy—and set aside the rest—the successful—as being irrelevant except as a resource to be used by the former.

Second, the economic status of any one individual is a measure of the ability of that individual only. It says nothing about the success of society as a whole. The economic success of the country as a whole is a much better measure, but it must first be kept in mind that it is not the collective wealth of society, rather it is the wealth of many individuals of whom the society is comprised. Society does not exist as a separate entity. It is merely the collection of all the individuals who live within it.

And if you were really concerned about the status of those dysfunctional people, then I would claim that a laissez-faire capitalist society is the only society that would properly serve their interests. However, this is not the moral justification of a society; it is merely a secondary effect. But it is true that they are better off in a capitalist society than any other. Just look at the miserable existence such people suffer through in a socialist society—as well as the miserable existence of all of the other members of those societies. It can be demonstrated that the degree of freedom within a society is directly proportional to the degree of economic prosperity within that society. It is no coincidence that America, being the freest society in the history of the world, has achieved the greatest degree of wealth.

I never ceases to confound me how socialists, like yourself, always use some insignificant European economy as an example of their utopia. If Denmark is such a shining example, why is it not an economic super power? Of course the obvious answer to this is that you are not concerned about generating wealth, only of redistributing it. Socialists are always fond of pointing out how their shining gems (whether they be Canada, Germany, Denmark, or any other) have all the same advanced technology (with primary focus on medical care) as can be found in The United States. But what you fail to realize is that these technological advances would not even exist were it not for the existence of the Capitalist countries that were free to develop and create them. As Ayn Rand pointed out, wealth has to be created before it can be had or redistributed.

The short and simple answer as to how best to handle the unfortunate few—and they are few—who cannot function in a society through no fault of their own is that they should rely on the voluntary efforts of others through charity. Usually such people have friends and family to start with, and if that is not enough, then there has never been a shortage of goodwill in a free society. Prior to the social welfare programs that were established in our

own country, such cases that genuinely needed help were rare, and the amount of charity necessary to help them was generous. In today's mixed economy welfare state, the number of people clamoring to get their "fair share" is greater than ever, and many people are unwilling to donate to charity because they feel they have already done enough after being robbed by the government via the tax system. Despite all of this, the amount of money that is donated to charity in this country is overwhelming, which goes to prove how benevolent free people really are, and is a testament to how much wealth we really have in our country.

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "Is it rational to fear death?"

A: Fear is an emotion. As such, like any other emotion, it is an automatic response to something based on your hierarchy of values. Having an emotion is neither rational nor irrational. It is simply is. However, using your emotions as a guide to action is irrational because you are then substituting your emotional state for your faculty of reason.

Phobias are sometimes referred to as "irrational fears," but this is using the term irrational in a different context. In this case, irrational means causeless or baseless. It does not mean that someone has abandoned their rational faculty. Such fears may hinder one's ability to act rationally, but it is the extent that they are still able to think rationally that allows such people to recognize, deal with, and eventually conquer these fears—usually with professional help.

Now there is another way that this question can be taken to mean. While it is perfectly normal to fear dying in a life and death situation—in fact it would be abnormal not to—it is quite another thing to worry and dwell on the fact that one will eventually die and spend all your life worrying about it. If one does this, then he is essentially already dead because he is preventing himself from experiencing life and living it to its fullest.

If it is the case that one is spending a lot of time thinking about dying, then one should probably seek some help. It may be that such a person is not identifying or achieving sufficient values in his life. As ironic as it may seem, the more you fear death in this manner, the more you lack a reason to avoid it. As Ayn Rand once said, a fear of death is not necessarily a love for life. Also, in response to Phil Donahue when he asked her if she was afraid of death, she once replied no because, as she explained, "I won't be here to experience it."

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "Are virtues natural? If so, do we have control over them? If they aren't, are they artificial?"

A: Virtues do in fact have a reference in reality. They are determined by what is necessary to support Man's life *qua* Man. That is, they are determined by Man's identity, His requirements for survival. Because of this they are natural, not subjective. They cannot be whatever we want them to be.

Does this then mean we have no control over them? That depends on what one means by this. We have no control in determining what proper virtues are, but we do have volitional control over whether or not we recognize them as such and exercise them.

For instance, Man has no control over the fact that he needs to eat and it is therefore a virtue to do so. However, this does not mean that He will immediately recognize this fact nor act on it if and when he does. It will not give Him knowledge of what constitutes a healthy diet, nor guarantee that He will eat in a healthy manner if and when he does learn. Unlike animals, people have volition. They can choose to starve-and often do-or even choose to ingest toxic poisons. But we do have the ability to do what is right and eat a balanced meal.

All of this is making me hungry, so I am going to go grab a pizza now.

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "After one year of dating and spending weekends over there, I am now co-habiting with the significant other. I made sure that he was alright with it and the vocabulary shifted from "I'm really happy you are visiting" to "I'll be home soon" in two months of stay. He makes me feel at home and we share expenses for food, but when I asked if I could help pay for part of the rent, he refused.

Aristotle, in your most objective state of being, do you think I should further share a consistent habitat with this person I love and care about, or live back and forth between my own place and his (considering the "freshness-value" of a relationship that is carrying out it's "normal" course)?"

A: I have to say that I am not at liberty to give you a definitive answer to your question since I do not know enough about the particulars and the circumstances of your situation. Unlike Dr. Laura, I will not chastise you for your cohabitation, rather I will congratulate you on your success at finding someone you enjoy being with.

My suggestion at this time, is that if you truly feel the way you have described, then you should feel comfortable enough to discuss this with him directly, determine if he feels the same way as you, and ask him if there are some hidden implications behind why he will not let you share rent. At this time, you may be reading more into what he is saying than is

intended. There are many other ideas that could be implied as well. Are you making significantly less money than he is? Is he merely acting chivalrously? Are there other areas where you might be contributing instead (perhaps pay the utilities or for groceries)? Does he have feelings of guilt when accepting money from others (regardless of how irrational that would be in this case)?

I hope this helps. A good relationship is a wonderful thing and I would hate to see you induce undue tension into it and perhaps jeopardize it for something that may not mean what you think it does. From what I can tell, you have a deeper problem than that of rent: you need to work on communication. I hope that everything works out for the best!

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "How should I live my life?"

A: Rationally.

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "Is logic truly analytic?"

A: Truly, but not purely. It is both deductive and inductive, and must first start with observation in order to obtain premises with which to start.

**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 Fidel 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: "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: "Your page is like a ray of sunlight in the dark world that seems to surround me. Thank you for it -- but, tell me, how can I maintain happiness like yours, when every time I turn on the TV news or pick up a newspaper, there is something that seems calculated to tick me off? When so many people are clamoring for the power to control YOUR life, as they seem to be doing over mine -- how do you persuade yourself that they will fail -- if that is indeed what you do? How do you maintain a sense of benevolence when (most) people seem so dead-set on making life into hell?"

A: I can understand your frustration. The key here is not to focus on the negative, but on the positive. And above all else, do not take what they are doing on such a personal level. Yes, the actions of others do affect us both directly and indirectly, but their goal is not control over YOUR life in particular. Remind yourself that all of the evil in our world can be attributed to the rejection of reason. With this in mind, the solution is simple but the task at hand is large. We must return to reason. To do this we must fight for it wherever possible and practical. Write letters to your congressmen, local and national newspapers, support the Ayn Rand Institute, etc. I say possible and practical because none of this should involve a sacrifice on your part. If you feel up to it and it is a value to you, fight wherever you can. Ayn Rand once said "He who fights for the future lives in it today."

I think that it is also important that you do your best to surround yourself with positive thinking individuals and focus on the good things in life. I know that it is hard sometimes, but to paraphrase Ayn Rand (I cannot recall the exact quote), do not let your view of man be distorted by those corrupt few who are weak, spineless, irrational and have not achieved that title. If I could, I would like to recommend a lecture tape by Andrew Bernstein. It is

called "Villainy: The Nature of Evil" and can be purchased from Second Renaissance books. It is a very good tape which has something very positive and inspirational to say in the end. Lastly, just remember that before there were all these Objectivists--what few there are--it all began with just one. And, look how much influence Ayn Rand has had in just a short time. Now, think of what all of us can accomplish if we set our minds to it.

Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle

Q: "I want a clear explanation of why people need to feed their egos."

A: Each man needs to "feed his ego" so that he may have one. One could have asked the question another way: "why should a man have an ego?" The answer to that question is: "he does by his nature qua man." Or "should a man reject his ego?" Not if he wants to live. For the clearest possible explanation, I recommend that you read Ayn Rand's book The Virtue of Selfishness. If what she has to say in this book is not clear enough, then I don't know what is. I hope that you like it and it helps you out.

Your friend in reason,
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**

What is the meaning of life?

A: Life is a process of self-generated and self-sustaining action.

**Your friend in reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "What is the bear-nevolent universe premise?"

A: The bear-nevolent universe premise is a play on words. It refers to Ayn Rand's belief in the "benevolent universe premise" and how Robert, Amy, Scott and Eric believe that I personify it.

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**