

AN AFRICAN CRITIQUE OF AYN RAND'S CONCEPT OF THE SELF AN AFRICAN CRITIQUE OF AYN RAND'S CONCEPT OF THE SELF

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Abstract

Ayn Rand's egoism stands in sharp contrast to the traditional African ontology of the self, which often centers on communal mutuality and the interconnectedness of individuals within their communities. Rand argues that the moral purpose of an individual's life is to pursue their own happiness or rational self-interest. Unlike hedonist egoism, which seeks immediate pleasure, Rand emphasizes long-term well-being and the use of reason to guide one's action. Thus, the rational self-interest for her is the foundation of morality and that individuals should prioritize their happiness and well-being. This view contradicts the emphasis on communality found in many African philosophical traditions. From an African perspective, human identity and fulfillment are deeply rooted in one's integration into the community and relationship with others. Adopting the analytic method, this paper argues that, Rand's rejection of altruism provides a provocative framework for understanding ethics and individualism which is idealistic and difficult to apply consistently in real-world context. This paper concludes that the African notion of communality is a veritable ingredient for fostering social solidity, extensive support systems which are needed during social strife

Keywords: Egoism, Communality, Community, Happiness, the Self

Introduction

Ayn Rand's egoism is a cornerstone of her broader philosophical system known as objectivism. She argues that, the moral purpose of an individual's life is the

pursuit of their own happiness or rational self-interest. According her, rational self-interest involves choosing actions that support and enhance one's life and happiness based on reason and factual reality. As such, she rejects altruism (a view that individuals have a moral obligation to serve others or place others' needs above one's own). She views altruism as a destructive force that undermines individual autonomy and self-worth. The paper seeks to examine how her philosophy of rational self-interest clashes with African communal values, ethics, and social structures. This include analyzing how Rand's emphasis on individualism contrasts with African concepts of communality, the belief in interconnectedness and community, as well as exploring how her ideas from her notable works; *The Fountainhead*, *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Virtue of Selfishness* have overlooked historical and cultural contexts unique to Africa. This paper analyzes the implications of Rand's philosophy on issues like social justice, inequality, and development within African societies. Ayn Rand's philosophy of egoism supports the pursuit of individual self-interest as a moral imperative; however, many African cultures place a strong emphasis on communal values, mutual support and collective well-being where individuals are expected to prioritize the welfare of the community over their own interests. Rand's objectification of the self undermines these principles by prioritizing self-interest over collective well-being and failing to acknowledge the moral obligations individuals have towards their communities. This analysis will reveal the blind spots in Rand's philosophy regarding the complexities of African social and ethical realities.

Rand's Concept of the Self

Rand's notion of the self is a fundamental aspect of her philosophy. Her views of the self are closely linked to her broader ethical, metaphysical and epistemological ideas. Rand holds that the individual is the primary unit of a moral and social concern. Each person is an end in themselves, with the right to live for their own sake, without being subjugated to the needs or demands of others. Her emphasis on autonomy and sovereignty of the individual means that each person has absolute right to govern their own life, make their own decision and pursue their own happiness in way that they rationally deem fit (Rand 10). Accordingly, she sees reason as man's basic means of survival. For her, reason is the fundamental means by which humans understand the world and makes decisions. It is the exercise of rational thought that individuals can achieve their goals and live fulfilling lives. Thus, rationality is the primary virtue in Rand's ethical system as it involves adherence to objective reality, logical thinking and the rejection of contradictions.

Tara Smith a prominent philosopher and scholar extensively studied and written about Rand's philosophy of objectivism particularly focusing on rand's normative ethics. In her book *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics: the Virtue Egoist* offers a detailed defense of rand's ethical egoism. She clarifies the misunderstandings

about Rand's notion of self-interest distinguishing it from common misconception of selfishness and hedonism. Smith emphasizes that Rand's concept of rational self-interest is about long-term well-being and flourishing, and not about immediate gratification or exploiting other. She argues that living rationally and pursuing one's values leads to genuine happiness and fulfillment. Based on Rand's egoism, man should act to realize his own desires and interests. In other words, it is every man's moral duty to achieve long-term personal happiness and not sacrifice his own welfare and happiness for those of someone else. Based on this ethical theory, it is only self-preservation which would motivate man to apply moral values and principles in his life (Smith 23). Smith mentions an important and remarkable point in Rand's ethical system, according to Smith, when Rand speaks of two options of life and death for man and considers the selection of one of them as the starting point for moral values and principles, in fact she explains her egoistic ethical system as a man who has chosen his life as having the highest value has implicitly accepted that he cannot put other people's lives before his own and cannot sacrifice his desires for others' desires. Thus, in order to preserve his own life, one must put his happiness at a higher priority than the happiness of others (Smith 24- 25).

According to Rand, the most essential characteristic of an ideal man is that he considers existence to be an independent goal. In other words, an ideal man never uses his existence and desires as a means to achieve other things (Peikoff, 301). In every egoistic ethical system, the term selfishness is perceived in relation to the term self. Therefore, one of the most important questions ethical egoism is meant to answer is the meaning of man's self, Rand tries to fuse the meaning of this term with that of man's values and mind. One of her important works covering this issue is the novel *Fountainhead*, where Rand introduces the theory of egoism as one that has a fundamental role for man's intellect and values. She also creates a deep relation between fundamental rational moral values and ethical egoism. Our capacity for reason is what enables us to survive and flourish (Rand 26). We are not born knowing what is good for us; nor are we born knowing how to achieve what is good for us; that too is learned. It is by reason that we learn what food is and what poison, what animals are useful or dangerous to us, how to make tools, what forms of social organization are fruitful (26). Rand's philosophy emphasizes reason as the primary means of human cognition and the foundation of ethical decision-making (*Atlas Shrugged* 56). According to Rand, individuals should pursue rational self-interest, asserting that ethical behavior aligns with one's rational long-term well-being (*The Virtue of Selfishness* 32). Her objectivist ethics rejects altruism, advocating for the pursuit of one's own happiness as a moral imperative (*Atlas Shrugged* 117). This assertion lays her foundation on self-interest. Just as man cannot survive by any random means, but must discover and practice principles which his survival requires, so man's self-interest cannot be determined by blind desires or random whims, but must be discovered and achieved by the guidance of rational principles.

Contrary to the conventional outlook, Rand argues for a new conception of self-interest grounded not in desires or emotions but in facts and reason. To identify one's true interests takes real cognitive work. Rand holds that interest is a wide abstraction that covers the entire field of ethics. It includes the issues of: man's values, his desires, his goals and their actual achievement in reality. A man's interests depend on the kind of goals he chooses to pursue, his choice of goals depends on his desires, his desires depend on his values and for a rational man, his values depend on the judgment of his mind. Desires or feelings or emotions or wishes or whims are not a valid standard of value, nor a valid criterion of man's interests (*Virtue of Selfishness* 32). Ayn Rand's perspective on self-interest underscores the notion "that pursuing one's self-interest is not only rational but also a morally justifiable endeavor" (38). She contends that individuals, when acting in their own self-interest guided by reason, contribute positively to the collective welfare of society.

The Self and Human Existence in Rand's Philosophy

In Rand's philosophy, the concept of the self is closely tied to her understanding of human existence. She sees the individual as a rational being with the ability to achieve happiness and fulfillment through the pursuit of their own goals and interests. According to Rand, the purpose of life is "the achievement of happiness" (23), and this happiness is only possible when the individual is free to pursue their own goals without interference from other. For Rand, "the fundamental right of the individual is the right to his own life" (32). This means that the individual has the right to exist and to pursue their own goals without interference from others. She held onto the opinion that only social system consistent with this moral premise is *laissez-faire* capitalism, which is a system in which the government has a very limited role and individuals are free to pursue their own economic and social goals. For Rand, individuals are not just separate from each other, but also in competition with each other. She writes, "Man is an end in himself, not a means to the ends of others, and he must live by his own effort" (Rand 48). She sees this competition as natural and necessary, and believes that it leads to greater achievement and progress. In her definition of value, Rand asserts that it is that which one acts to gain and keep. The implication of this theory is that all that I act to gain and or keep is of value to me provided that the reason dictates it to be beneficial to my existence. But then, are all men's actions directed by reason and by reason alone?

This is even a controversial debate in the philosophy of action.

Davidson is of the view that "the mental states the agent invokes as justifying his actions are physical states that cause them" (Davidson 685), and that both our desire and belief jointly cause our actions, not all persons act with hundred percent rationality anytime and anywhere. Sometimes we act based on our beliefs and desires, and those moments we do that, we act with some gains in view. Many a time we do confuse actions caused by mental states with that caused by physical

states. Therefore, our emotions and beliefs and all other physical states are capable of influencing our choices of actions. By and large, what one acts to gain and or keep could be induced either by reason or desires/beliefs since man is constituted by both faculties as demonstrated by Butler. Again, if one decides to go by Rand's position that whatever one acts to get and gain is of value to that particular person once it is directed by reason, then her theory has failed to address the total view of human nature and human nature has been regarded as source of norms of conduct as well as presenting constraints on living a good life.

Therefore egoism has set a high moral standard for man which is not in tandem with his nature. That is to say, existence is a fact of reality; it is a natural reality and that any code of ethics must be based on it. What it implies is that every moral judgment must have reality as its standard (*The Metaphysical versus the Man-made* 36). Man is a higher organism and for that, the range of actions required for his survival is wider. It includes high level of consciousness, choice, and reason which he does not have in common with other lower organisms. Rand argues thus: animals indeed possess consciousness but it functions automatically; an animal perceives what it is able to perceive and survives accordingly, no further than the perceptual level permits" (*For The New Intellectual* 15). On the other hand, she maintains that, man cannot survive on the perceptual level of his consciousness; his senses do not provide him with an automatic guidance, they do not give him knowledge he needs, only the material knowledge, which his mind has to integrate. Man is the only species who has to perceive reality-which means: to be conscious by choice (20). It is clear from the above that reason is the faculty that identifies and integrates the material provided by man's senses. This integration of perception into conceptions belongs explicitly to man and not to animals.

This is done through the process of abstraction and he performs this feat by choice. The process of abstraction and of concept-formation is a process of reason, of thought; it is neither automatic nor instinctive, nor involuntary nor infallible. Man has to initiate it, to sustain it, and to bear responsibility for its result. Man's consciousness is that which is punctuated with choice; his knowledge of what is good or bad is not given automatically through sensation but through the process of thinking. This is man's basic means of survival. According to Rand, man has no automatic code of survival. His particular distinction from all other living species is the necessity to act in the face of alternatives by means of volitional choice. He has no automatic knowledge of what is good for him or evil, what values his life depends on, what course of action it requires. Rand sees survival (life) as the ultimate goal, an end in itself that makes the existence of value possible. It is a metaphysical fact that life is the only phenomenon that is an end in itself. Life is the value gained and kept by a constant process of action. It is an epistemological fact that the concept of value is dependent upon and derived from the antecedent concept of life such that to speak of values apart from life is worse than contradiction in terms. It is only the concept of life that makes the concept of value

possible (*Virtue of Selfishness* 17). What Rand is trying to establish is that for the fact that living entities exist and function necessitates the existence of values and of an ultimate value which for any given entity is its own life.

Continued existence of man does not take effect automatically unlike other living organisms; life of man must have to be sustained by a process of self-generated, self-sustaining action; he must act to sustain his life, if he chooses to live. It is not the case with plants and other animals which are genetically coded to act automatically in self-sustaining ways (e.g., to absorb water, to convert sunlight into energy, to hunt). They have physiological rules; they are deterministic trackers. Though in the case of humans, there are certain actions that are physiologically determined. In her definition of life as a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action, Rand created a problem. If one were to follow this definition, it then means that life is born by the self-generated and self-initiated action of man. This definition tends to endorse inequality in the society because obviously, there are certain categories of people who cannot help themselves by their own actions—the baby in the womb, the senile, the imbeciles, and the aged among others. The implication is that such sect of people would tend to have little or no right to any value and the corollary is that their life is threatened and short-lived because the very values which they need for survival is not within their reach. However, Kant warns that human being should not be treated as a thing, a means to an end but as end in itself because of the possession of rationality (268).

The Self as a Moral Template in Rand's Philosophy

In Rand's philosophy, actions are morally right if they promote the individual's rational self-interest. As such, objective moral standards are based on rational principles that individual must adhere to for their own benefits (Rand 110). Selfishness is not condemned but rather celebrated as a virtue that, when tempered by reason, leads to personal fulfillment and overall prosperity. This viewpoint challenges conventional notions about self-interest, the mere fact that a man desires something does not constitute a proof that the object of his desire is good, nor that its achievement is actually to his interest. A rational person, argues Rand, does not regard because I want it or because I feel like it as a sufficient cause and validation of his actions. Instead, he forms a conception of his interests by a process of reason, and does not act to achieve a desire until and unless he is able rationally to validate it in the full context of his knowledge and of his other values and goals. Rand argues that the only way to gain knowledge is through reason, rather than faith, intuition, or emotion, saying that this principle is essential for the individual pursuit of happiness and success. She also argues that "man is a being of self-made wealth" (Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* 23). In this view, she rejects the idea of inherited wealth or property. Rand argues that "property rights are the foundation of all other rights" (33). She sees property as an extension of the individual, something that must be protected by the government in order for the individual to be free.

Rand argues that without strong property rights, individuals are not truly free to pursue their own happiness. From Rand's perspective, "There is no such thing as the public interest except as the sum of the interests of individual men" (35). Rand rejects the idea that there is any such thing as a collective public interest. Rather, she sees the public interest as simply the sum of individual interests. Rand also argues that "The smallest minority on earth is the individual" (59). This emphasizes Rand's view of the individual as the most important unit of society. She sees each individual as a unique being. In Rand's view, "Society is made possible only by the existence of a fundamental moral fact: the distinction between good and evil" (26). She argues that without a shared understanding of morality, society would not be possible. In this way, Rand's concept of egoism is connected to her broader philosophy of Objectivism. Her philosophy is built on the idea that human happiness and freedom can only be achieved through individual selfishness. The right to agree with others is not a problem in any society; it is the right to disagree that is crucial, the egoist in the absolute sense is not the man who sacrifices for others, he is the man who stands above the need of using others in any manner. This highlights the importance of "individual freedom of thought and expression" (Rand 58). For Rand, it is not enough for individuals to simply agree with one another; they must also have the right to disagree and express their own unique thoughts and opinions. In the end, Rand's concept of egoism can be summed up by the following quote: Rand makes it clear that her concept of egoism is not about using or exploiting others, but rather about living a life of independent achievement and happiness.

An Overview of African Ontology of the Self

In African ontology, the concept of the self is deeply intertwined with communal relationships, spirituality and a holistic understanding of existence. Unlike the western notion of the self, which often emphasizes individualism and personal autonomy, African ontology places significant emphasis on the interconnectedness of individual within their communities? The African concept of *Ubuntu*, which translates to mean "I am because we are", epitomizes the communal nature of the self in African ontology. This philosophy asserts that an individual's identity is inextricably linked to their relationships with others. The self which is fundamentally relational, holistic and dynamic is understood and realized through social interactions and communal bonds from an African perspective. As such, personal identity is often seen as a collective construct since one's sense of self is derived from their role and responsibility within the family, community, and society at large, and it is shaped by communal relationships, spiritual connections and holistic understanding that integrates physical, spiritual, and social dimensions. This collective identity fosters a sense of belonging and mutual responsibility.

Kwasi Wiredu's philosophical work explores how traditional African concept of the self can engage with and enrich global philosophical discourse, He emphasizes

the rational and ethical dimensions of African ontology of the self that “The concept of the self in African thought is essentially a social concept” (Wiredu 43). He argues that the African conception of the self is based on the idea that the individual is deeply connected to the community and cannot be separated from it. The African conception emphasizes the importance of community and interdependence, while the Objectivist conception emphasizes individual freedom and self-determination. Neither is necessarily superior or inferior to the other. The African concept of self is incorporated in *Ubuntu* (Murove 1). This shows that the African concept of the self emphasizes the importance of interdependence and interconnectedness. The word 'person' in African languages also means 'human being' (2). In African languages, there is no word for individual or self. This shows that the African concept of the self is fundamentally different from the Western conception.

The individual is not seen as a separate entity in the African tradition, but rather as part of a larger whole. The community is essential to the individual's identity, and vice versa. Individuals cannot be understood without understanding the context of their community. In the African context, the person is a person through others, a person-in-community; and the person is not an individual but rather a being-in-relation (Obi 63). The individual is seen as a mirror that reflects the people and environment around them. This shows that the individual is not seen as separate from their context, but rather as connected to it.

The African existence is relational. This ontological relational existence of man does not stop at relationship with the fellow humans, but embraces other physical and spiritual realities. The human person is ontologically articulated as a life force in active communion with other living forces in the world (Metuh 165). Each person, in a nexus of interacting elements of the self and of the world which determines and is determined by his behavior. For Richard Benson (61), the notion of personhood or self is dependent upon people's relationship with their community. In African traditional worldview identity is rooted in the family and the community. In Africa, life or existence is not an individual venture; the meaning of self is found in and through his relationship with the other or others. Self finds meaning in the idea and reality of the other and without others; he loses his values (Iroegbu 349).

According to Okere (159), the self as far studied remains in a way only an abstraction in fact the self is never alone. The individual is never a pure isolated individual. For Africans, no one can be his very self, outside the relation with the others and the meaning of life depends on the relationship with others. Self is a being in process and his experiences grow along with him. Self therefore is held in a web-like relations and interactions with his community and other realities. In Africa one cannot think, consider any person without due reference to his family and community. They are indispensable to one another. The idea of the self in

African thought is a concept for community building. According to Mbiti, the implication that the self partakes in this corporate existence and as a member, his fortune and misfortune becomes that of the society (108). It is on this basis that any grave violation of the moral order has serious social consequence. The common membership of oneself in a family constitutes a legitimate basis for the idea of universal self (or unity).

Divergence between Rand and African Concept of Self

One of the main differences between Rand's concept of the self and the African concept of the self is the emphasis on individualism versus communalism. Rand's view is strongly individualistic, focusing on the importance of the individual's ability to pursue their own goals and interests, without being bound by the expectations of others. In contrast, the African concept of the self emphasizes the individual's connection to their community and the importance of relationships and interdependence. According to Hume, the passions or emotions are weak and hence dangerous, and so must be kept in check or controlled by reason and that passions or emotions can be dangerous due to their contagious nature and potential to influence actions (439). This view of emotion as a threat to rationality and morality is reflected in Rand's work. She sees emotion as something that can lead to irrational and harmful behavior, and must be controlled and overcome in order to achieve true rationality and happiness. In contrast, the African concept of the self sees emotion as an essential part of the self, the ability to feel and express emotion. "The African self is a person who experiences life as emotion-value and who therefore is led by what is emotionally relevant and appropriate in a given situation" (Serequeberhan 131). The emotional experience of the individual is seen as a core aspect of their identity. The individual's emotions are not seen as something to be controlled or suppressed, but rather as an important part of their ability to understand and respond to the world around them.

Rand and the African view of the self are different in their understanding of rationality. In Rand's view, rationality is seen as a purely individualistic process, in which the individual uses their reason to pursue their own interests. However, in the African view, rationality is understood as a communal process, in which the individual and the community work together to make decisions and solve problems. Rand's egoism places excessive emphasis on individualism, largely disregarding the intricate web of social relationships and interdependence. Human beings are social animals, and our actions often have repercussions that extend beyond ourselves, neglecting these interconnections can lead to a myopic view that undermines the importance of social cooperation, empathy, and shared responsibility. In contrast, a more balanced approach recognizes the importance of both individual autonomy and the collective good, fostering a sense of social harmony and cooperation (Miller 103). Just as Ajah posits that the ontological order in interaction is that whatever happens to the individual happens to the

whole group and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual (58).

Rand's egoism champions the pursuit of individual success and achievement, but it fails to adequately address the issue of inequality. In the pursuit of self-interest, individuals with greater resources and opportunities are likely to have a significant advantage over those who are less fortunate. In fact Rand holds that the ego is the fountainhead of human progress (941). This can perpetuate and exacerbate existing socioeconomic disparities, leading to a society that lacks fairness and equal opportunities for all. A more nuanced perspective would acknowledge the importance of creating a just and equitable society that ensures a level playing field for everyone. Rand's egoism places little emphasis on ethical obligations towards others, as it predominantly centers on self-interest. This approach neglects the moral imperative to act in ways that benefit society as a whole. Ethical obligations, such as promoting justice, fairness, and the well-being of others, are crucial for maintaining a functioning and harmonious society. By focusing solely on individual self-interest, Rand's egoism undermines the importance of collective responsibility and the ethical obligations that bind us together as a community. The nature of the self is reflected in the importance of community and kinship in African cultures. The "African family is not only a social system but the basis of African ontology" (Kaphagawani 301). This means that the family is not just a social unit, but is also a fundamental part of how Africans understand the world and their place in it. This understanding of the self is fundamental for many aspects of African life, including ethics, law, and politics.

Conclusion

The notion of the self in African ontology is fundamentally relational, holistic and dynamic. It is shaped by communal relationships, spiritual connections and a holistic understanding of reality that integrates physical, spiritual and social dimensions. This conception of the self emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals, the sacredness of life, and the importance of ethical behavior that maintains harmony within the community. This rich and multifaceted understanding of the self continues to evolve, engaging with contemporary realities while preserving its deep cultural roots. Ayn Rand's egoism highlights the importance of individual rights and self-interest in achieving human flourishing and that, individuals should pursue their own happiness and well-being without sacrificing others or expecting others to sacrifice for them. This emphasis on individualism is rooted in Rand's belief that individuals are ends in themselves, with inherent dignity and worth (30). However, this extreme individualism neglects social responsibility and communal values (Nkrumah 15). As Kwame Nkrumah argues, "The individual is not an isolated entity, but a member of a community" (15). Africans place a strong emphasis on the interconnectedness of individuals within their communities (Gyekye 85; Mbiti 176). Selfhood goes beyond superficiality and physical attributes (Fasiku 350) it is defined in terms of

social roles and responsibilities, and the welfare of the community takes precedence over individual desires.

In African ontology therefore, the individual is seen not as an entity but as an integral part of the community, with a responsibility to contribute to the common good (Wiredu 18). This emphasis on communalism is rooted in the African concept of Ubuntu, which recognizes the interconnectedness of all human beings (Gyekye 25). However, this emphasis on communalism may compromise individual autonomy and freedom (Wiredu 20). A balanced approach to human flourishing requires reconciling individualism and communalism. Individuals should pursue their own happiness and well-being while also acknowledging social responsibility and communal values (Gyekye 30). This balanced approach recognizes the importance of individual freedom and autonomy while also promoting social harmony and collective well-being (Nyerere 18). As Julius Nyerere argues, "Individual freedom and social responsibility are not mutually exclusive, but complementary" (18). Despite their apparent differences, Rand's egoism and African communalism can be reconciled by recognizing that individual well-being and communal welfare are not mutually exclusive. Maintaining personal happiness and pursuing self-interest can contribute to the overall well-being of the community, as individuals who thrive are better equipped to support those around them. Conversely, a strong sense of community and interconnectedness can provide individuals with the social support and resources necessary to achieve their personal goals. In this sense, egoism and communalism can be viewed as complementary rather than contradictory ethical principles.

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