



THE ETHICAL AND SOCIO-POLITICAL TENSION BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETY IN AYN RAND'S *ATLAS SHRUGGED* AND DAVE EGGERS' *THE CIRCLE*

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This article examines two novels, *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) by Ayn Rand and *The Circle* (2013) by Dave Eggers, through the context of American capitalism as a thriving political and socio-economic vision that spans from the 1950s to the present. *Atlas Shrugged* conveys Rand's portrayal of a dystopian America moving towards statism, a political system where state governments have significant centralised control over socio-economic affairs, and towards altruism, the ethics where everyone must forsake their own interests and live for the common good. Rand juxtaposes this portrayal with her endorsement of Galt's Gulch, a utopia adherent to what she calls "ethical egoism," a system of ethics where everyone works for their self-interest and does not ask for the sacrifice of others, and to *laissez-faire* capitalism, a political and socio-economic system that forbids government interference in private economic affairs. Meanwhile, *The Circle* paints a portrait of the Circle, an American hi-tech company that also functions as a community. Founded on the morality of altruism, principles that share central ideas with Rand's conceptualization of altruism, the Circle is a techno-utopia hiding a dystopian nightmare, one created and nurtured by a few egoistic individuals. This article argues that both novels serve as a detailed and telling critique of the ongoing moral and socio-political tension between individuals and society. The first part of this article situates the two novels in their historical contexts and points out the socio-political link between them, the second investigates the ethical and socio-political systems of the abovementioned societies and their impacts upon the characters in the novels, and the third examines some flaws in Rand's thinking, which are embedded in her novel, and attempts a reconciliation between individual and societal interest.

Throughout her youth, Rand was a witness to the totalitarian practices of Soviet Russia. She saw how, instead of giving free education to the proletariat and serving the common good as they purported to do, the Communist Party, led by Vladimir



Lenin and later Joseph Stalin, “destroy[ed] a whole generation of intellectuals” and drove the nation to mass starvation and poverty (Scianarra 1995, 70). Consequently, Rand conceived her country as a living embodiment of altruism, the morality she believed to be “the root of all evil,” and statism to sow the seeds of intellectual and socio-economic destruction (Rand 1967, 36). Standing in contrast with Soviet Russia at the time was America with its capitalist system, long-held tradition of rugged individualism, and advocacy of the individual right to “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” (Cullen 2003, 38). In Russia, Rand was exposed to these ideals through American films during her teenage years. She then took this foreign country as her model of what a society of free individuals could be and emigrated there when she was twenty-one in 1926 (Ryan 2003, 469). Here in America, she wrote *Atlas Shrugged*, a novel that embodies her philosophy, Objectivism (Rand 1967, 166). Central to this philosophy and *Atlas Shrugged* is Rand’s theorization of ethical egoism and *laissez-faire* capitalism. She believes that human society is “only a number of individual men” standing alone as unrelated beings, each with the freedom to think, act, and make wealth notwithstanding his/her background (1967, 12). Rand (2007, 1064) also specifically emphasizes that with this freedom individuals can come up with great scientific and technological inventions and these will push forward the advancement of mankind and socio-economic development.

Due to this emphasis on technological progress, Rand’s philosophy and *Atlas Shrugged* share core ideas with another fundamental American tenet, technological utopianism. This ethos carries the notion that the expansion of technology brings about human and societal improvement, optimum efficiency, and the eradication of social problems (Segal 1985, 21). Inspired by these utopian ideals, American technocrats in the twentieth century limited governmental involvement in their business affairs and intensified the use and invention of technologies to plan cities and govern commerce (Segal 1985, 114). The results were indeed socio-economic growth and individuals’ increased productivity. Given the similarities between Rand’s philosophical beliefs and several said ethos of America, Burns observes that Objectivism not only ‘had significant parallels in American history’ but also leaves an enduring legacy on contemporary America (2009, 190). Borsook (2000, 98) similarly argues that Rand’s view of individuals’ “total libertarian freedom” and technological expansion has become the hallmarks of current American hi-tech culture. American software designers and engineers today develop cutting-edge devices and apps that help individuals connect with others instantaneously and offer them conveniences, efficiency, and safety. What becomes clear at this point is the socio-political link between *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Circle*: a manifestation of Rand’s philosophy, *Atlas Shrugged* has long influenced American technoculture, while *The Circle* sets out specifically to critique this technoculture in contemporary America. Yet, as this article shows below, instead of advocating ethical



egoism and *laissez-faire* capitalism as *Atlas Shrugged* does, *The Circle* criticises the very way in which these systems are run and practiced.

In *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand portrays the imaginary American society as adhering to the ethical and socio-political systems of altruism and statism. In the first instance, the novel illuminates two principles of altruism. The first nullifies reason, and in replacement of it, celebrates 'instinct' and 'brother-love' as the guide to human life, while the second demands self-sacrifice for the sake of the collective good (Rand 2007, 54 and 134). Through its depiction of various characters including Dr Pritchett and philanthropist Slagenhop, the novel shows that, in adhering to those principles, these characters lose their ability to make rational and independent judgment for themselves (Rand 2007, 1010-1). This enables the state government in the novel to dictate its citizens' freedom and action in the name of the public good. Specifically, it suppresses the economic abilities of a few able, competent individuals and allows itself and the majority to feed on their productive and intellectual efforts. This is demonstrated by the novel's description of multiple government policies such as the Anti-dog-eat-dog Rule and the Equalization of Opportunity Bill. They mirror those in real America at the time and help criticize American politics that seemed to sway towards socialism during the 1930s (Rand 2007; Burns 2009, 63). Suffering from the devastating effects of altruism and statism on their economic power, the gifted, capable protagonists in *Atlas Shrugged* go on strike. They escape their old society and form their own community called Galt's Gulch, from which their theories of ethical egoism and *laissez-faire* capitalism are formulated.

In the first instance, the individuals of Galt's Gulch define their system of ethical egoism as advocating reason and personal freedom—as opposed to feelings and the public good—as the guide to human life (Rand 1967, 12). That is, they are allowed to follow their self-interests and develop their intellectual potential as far as this is not done at the expense of others' lives. This is clearly manifested in Rand's portrayal of John Galt whose unbridled pursuits of science and numerous hi-tech inventions are made possible by his freedom to follow his self-interest and care only for his life. As well as denouncing altruism, the individuals of Galt's Gulch opposes statism and instead, comply with *laissez-faire* capitalism, the only socio-political system they consider compatible with ethical egoism. This system is vividly portrayed when Galt gives Dagny Taggart a tour of Galt's Gulch. Here he showcases what economic freedom brings the members of his community. Without government interference, these individuals are free to exercise their economic power and expand their professions, which enables them each to dominate an industry. For example, protagonist Ellis Wyatt alone runs the oil industry while Galt owns the only powerhouse in Galt's Gulch. Wallowing in their money, the individuals of this society proudly display and elaborately discuss their economic achievements without a hint of shame, for this they perceive as the rightful reward of their productive and diligent labor. Moreover, with the absence of



government coercion, they are free to engage in voluntary trade. As Wyatt puts it, “we all grow together [and are] a voluntary association of men held together by nothing but every man's self-interest” (Rand 2007, 747). Giving a sense of both togetherness and individualism, Wyatt’s statement highlights the possibility of a peaceful co-existence where, through voluntary exchange and respect for each other’s selfish pursuits, individuals live together yet independently and are “free of each other” (Rand 2007, 722).

So far, this article has demonstrated how altruism and statism on the one hand, and ethical egoism and *laissez-faire* capitalism on the other, affect individuals’ economic power, their social relations, and governmental functions in *Atlas Shrugged*. This paragraph and the following one investigate how *The Circle* mirrors the principles of ethical egoism and *laissez-faire* capitalism in Rand’s novel and how they influence the Circle community, while also exposing the underlying ethics of altruism to which this community adheres. Similar to Galt’s Gulch, the Circle advocates ethical egoism, in that it endorses its members’ freedom to think and act rationally. Consequently, thousands of Circlers, as those who work for the company call themselves, are able to follow their interests and advance themselves creatively. Working and living in a peaceful, prosperous environment, these individuals invent cutting-edge technologies that provide security for, and boost the efficiency of, both individuals and society. This is seen in Eggers’s depiction of Ty Gospodinov, the founder of the Circle and a contemporary equivalence of *Atlas Shrugged*’s genius John Galt. Working to serve his interest and possessing the ability to “see ideas into execution,” Ty invents the Unified Operating System that not only “ha[s] overtaken the web and the world” but also produces enormous effects on individual life and productivity (Eggers 2013, 416 and 21). Furthermore, free to trade freely and voluntarily with others, Ty collaborates with Tom Stenton and Eamon Bailey; together they become the Three Wise Men managing the Circle. Although Ty later withdraws from the management of the company, Stenton and Bailey, using hi-tech tools, take over the governmental function of protecting individual economic rights to grant themselves maximum economic freedom, through which they expand their enterprise, establish a monopoly, and make unprecedented amounts of money. According to Mae, an enthusiastic newbie, as the Circle has been delivering “the best product,” it is morally right that the company earns enormous profit and establishes a monopolistic position in the tech market (Eggers 2013, 173-4).

Nevertheless, a further investigation into the Circle’s ideologies reveals that, as well as egoism and *laissez-faire* capitalism, the Wise Men promote and normalise altruism and surveillance capitalism. Similarly to the way the altruistic morality of Rand’s fictional American society impinges on its individuals, the social pressure for constant online “sharing” and “caring” at the Circle causes the Circlers and Circle users to lose their autonomy and individuality. Fed with Orwellian mottos, “SHARING IS CARING,” “SECRETS ARE LIES” and “PRIVACY IS THEFT,” these individuals have no



language of their own outside that of the company's tenets (Eggers 2013, 47). This allows the Wise Men to encroach on their privacy, covet and concentrate their behavioural data within their domain, and further their surveillance practices. Observing today's technology companies like Google and Microsoft, Zuboff (2019, 10) argues that these firms use surveillance to track and record individuals' behavior without their consent and this source of personal information is absolutely vital to the making of the firms' profit. They utilize it to discover individuals' behavioral patterns, and—by means of technology—influence and modify them to make their “future behavior” accurately predictable (Zuboff 2019, 203). The results are then sold to other firms like advertisers to generate surveillance revenues, and in the process, attain market power and control individual life (Zuboff 2019, 191). It is exactly via these methods that the Wise Men obtain endless economic and political power, which they then abuse to determine individuals' economic and personal affairs and transform their company into a totalitarian dystopia. This dystopia is illustrated through the Circle's invention of Demoxie, a tool that mandates every American to have a TruYou account and participate in municipal elections through the Circle. Failure to do so can result in Demoxie freezing their accounts until they provide the company with their input (Eggers 2013, 388). Given that these individuals use them to go about their daily business (such as communicating with colleagues and paying for shopping) the shut-off of these accounts is tantamount to that of their lives (Eggers 2013, 389). One of the Circle's victims is Mercer, whose desire to have the right to privacy and to be exempt from online life results in his own death. Stemming from intelligence, surveillance control is much more unsettling. The individuals of ability in Rand's novel can revolt against their government using their rationality. But faced with the creative, intellectual giants at the Circle, their powerful monitoring tools, and billions of Circle supporters, Mercer has to either submit or die, with both options being two sides of the same coin for him. As Zuboff argues, “surveillance capitalism thrives on the public's ignorance,” and without legal protection from it, “we are trapped in a condition of ‘no exit’” (2019, 488).

Eggers's depiction of the Circle as both utopian and dystopian, egoistic and altruistic, totalitarian and capitalistic, fundamentally shows that, altruism and egoism alike, when carried to the extreme, plunge both individuals and society into great conflict. It thus challenges Rand's understanding of human nature and human society, as embedded in her construction of Galt's Gulch. In portraying her heroic characters as both selfishly gaining economic power and uninterested in political control, Rand forgets that these two types of power overlap: the former, when pursued unrestrainedly and egoistically, generates and stimulates the latter. As seen in *The Circle*, although the Wise Men essentially follow their self-interests and employ their creative minds to create material wealth, their selfish greed impels them to make money and profit by tyrannical and political means. Arguably, Rand's promotion of untrammelled, self-cen-



tered pursuit of economic power gives rise to the Wise Men's moral and political tyranny, and in exposing the parallel development between economic and political power, *The Circle* serves as a strong piece of criticism against this promotion.

Through her depiction of Galt's Gulch, Rand also shows flaws in her understanding of human society, those that lead her to claim that businessmen and industrialists "need no other men" (Rand 1961, 75). These errors betray Rand's failure to recognize that the autonomous individual needs society to provide him/her with a safe environment in which to thrive as much as the former needs the latter to prosper (Durkheim 1982, 129). This sense is highlighted by Rand's unintentional depiction of the significance of social relationships, as seen, for example, in the collaboration of work on the John Galt Line in order for Dagny Taggart's railway to be in operation (Rand 2007, 203). Moreover, Rand's representation of the strength of the collective, as evident in the way they drive the minority of the elite, gifted individuals out of their joint society and force them to create a community elsewhere, proves that "the lone individual, reduced to his own resources, is unable to alter the social situation" (Durkheim 1976, 425). In *The Circle*, collaboration also plays a huge part in the company, as software designers and engineers have to work together to bring out "the best product." In the second instance, the novel projects a similar scene where—as discussed above—the brainwashed community of the Circlers and Circle users makes it impossible for individuals like Mercer to develop and pursue his self-interests. These examples in both novels highlight the power of the masses and profound significance of a safe and harmonious society necessary for individuals to follow their self-interests and advance themselves creatively. As Le Guin (2003, 274) puts it, "only the society could give security and stability, only the individual, the person, had the power of moral choice—the power of change."

Through a close analysis of *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Circle*, this article has explored Rand and Eggers' contrasting critiques of the moral and socio-political conflict between individuals and society, conflict that finds its roots in the American national ethos of rugged individualism and technological utopianism. While examining the Circle's dystopia, this article also identified some flaws in Rand's understanding of human nature and human society, those that are arguably responsible for the guiltless greed and moral depravity of today's surveillance capitalists. These flaws then draw special attention to the inextricable bond and mutual interdependence between individuals and society, and with it, the need of a balance between ethical egoism and ethical altruism, not the choice between one and the other.



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