

A New Battle Line is Drawn

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Forget conservatism vs. liberalism, capitalism against socialism, or even Democrats fighting Republicans. In picking Paul Ryan as his Vice Presidential running mate, Mitt Romney has drawn a new battle line. Throughout his political career, Paul Ryan has been an outspoken crusader in what he calls the “fight between individualism and collectivism.”

Sitting squarely in the individualist camp, Ryan draws ideas and inspiration from Russian-American author and philosopher Ayn Rand, whose works *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead* are required reading for his congressional staff. Speaking in 2005, Ryan told Atlas Society members: “I grew up on Ayn Rand... The reason I got involved in public service -- if I had to credit one thinker, one person – it would be Ayn Rand.”

In her writings, Rand preached her philosophy of “objectivism,” which includes a basic tenet that one’s morality should be directed solely by rational self interest – the pursuit of one’s own happiness. She rejected as “evil” the notion of altruism or putting another’s interests above your own. Like Ryan today, she railed against collectivism, writing “Collectivism means the subjugation of the individual to a group—whether to a race, class, or state does not matter. Collectivism holds that man must be chained to collective action and collective thought for the sake of what is called ‘the common good.’”

Ryan’s ascendancy in the Republican Party as House Budget Committee Chairman and now presumptive Vice Presidential nominee has him suddenly seeking distance from Rand. In a recent Fox News interview, Brit Hume asked: “Are you a disciple of Ayn Rand?” The congressman replied: “No. I really enjoyed her novels, *Atlas Shrugged* in particular... I later in life learned about what her philosophy was, it's called Objectivism. It's something that I completely disagree with. It's an atheistic philosophy.”

This new spin is a political necessity to reassure the GOP’s religious right. Surely those who still insist the President is a Muslim despite 20+ years of professed Christian faith and the absence of any other evidence will not readily accept Ryan’s about face?

Back in 2005, Ryan told Atlas Society members: “It’s so important that we go back to our roots to look at Ayn Rand’s vision, her writings, to see what our girding, under riding principles are.” This is not just some novelist whose works he fancied; Ryan refers to Rand the way most politicians invoke the words of our Founding Fathers.

I am not attacking Paul Ryan, and I'm not unsympathetic to his views on a difficult struggle. I just think he's mistaken to see the conflict between individual rights and common good as a fight that must be waged to the death. That's what worries me.

I too read Ayn Rand's novels as a young man. I found inspiration in strong, clear-minded, self-aware, characters who cherish independence. Such individuals are the foundation of a healthy democracy, and we are losing ground today in fostering those values of self-sufficiency. But, individualism is not enough. The great inventions and watershed achievements of mankind result from strong, intelligent, motivated individuals working collectively to accomplish more than they could alone.

I reject Rand's (and thus, Ryan's) binary notion of individualism vs. collectivism. For whatever flaws we suffer in governance, I believe in community. I embrace the visible and invisible ties that bind us. I know my actions impact others – not just in my neighborhood, but also around the globe. My morality says I must own up to the consequences my actions have for all humanity and for all life on this planet.

As the flight attendant says when I fly: "Secure your own oxygen mask before attempting to help a child." I must meet my own basic needs before I can help another. But, from there, I have a freely accepted duty to assist where I can. And, I count on others to be there for me. Interdependence has been part of human existence since prehistoric men and women first gathered in caves for mutual protection.

Our society adheres to individualistic principles of capitalism because we know no better way. But, most of us also care about something greater than ourselves. We freely risk our wellbeing in serving our country or saving others in peril. We see soldiers as heroes and praise Good Samaritans who risk their lives to drag someone from a burning car or dive into dangerous waters to rescue a drowning person.

Ayn Rand wrote unapologetically about the "virtue of selfishness." I hope Paul Ryan means it when says he rejects her philosophy. I'm just not sure.