



Self-Interest in Ayn Rand (1905–1982)

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A thinker's view of *self-interest* embodies a view of what the *self* is.

For example, consider the view that human beings are born in sin with selves constituted in part by disobedient and destructive drives. That view will generate a negative view of self-interest as something to be suppressed or overcome. For example, both the Christian doctrine of Original Sin and the Freudian account of the Id see the dominant problem in ethics to be restraining or constraining a self that is powerfully driven by socially-destructive desires.

By contrast, consider the view that sees selves as born plastic and as subsequently constituted by its prevailing social circumstances. That view will generate a neutral view of self-interest as being a repository or vehicle through which social values are realized. For example, both the Behaviorist doctrine of B. F. Skinner and the Postmodernist view of Michel Foucault see humans as initially-indeterminate beings and the key issue in ethics to be the management of the external power-relationships that will mold the human appropriately.

Many other views of the self are possible, and as a result many views of the moral status of self-interest are also possible.

Aristotle and Ayn Rand, in contrast to both positions above, have a positive view of self-interest based on a view of the self that is potential, but with objective physical and psychological needs and the capacity to develop itself in a way that self-responsibly and productively meets its needs. Consequently, the emphasis in their moralities is upon developing one's capacities—physical, rational, emotional, and so on—to become a fully actualized human being. Human beings have needs for creativity, physical pleasure, friendship, aesthetic appreciation, and more, and the development of our capacities to fulfill those needs achieves both our individual self-interests and, to the extent that we develop our capacities socially, our mutual self-interests.

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