

# The Ultimate Concern?

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## THE VIRTUE OF SELFISHNESS

By Ayn Rand

The American Library of World Literature, New York, 1964 144 pp paper \$.60

64

For those who still pause long enough to ponder the right or wrong of an incipient attitude or an anticipated act, the pivotal questions seem to be by what law, by which principle, by whose standard should judgments and decisions be made? Whenever these questions enter the public forum, the pendulum swings erratically from society's mores on the one extreme to heaven's "absolutes" on the other. In her presentation of the moral principles of objectivism, Rand brings the pendulum to rest somewhere in the center at a point marked "self," with the assertion that "the Objectivist ethics holds man's life as the *standard* of value — and *his own life* as the ethical *purpose* of every individual man" (p. 19).

According to Rand "the three cardinal values of the Objectivist ethics — the three values which, together, are the means to the realization of one's ultimate value, one's own life — are: Reason, Purpose, and Self-Esteem, with their three corresponding virtues: Rationality, Productiveness, Pride" (pp. 19-20). In this final motley triumvirate, rationality is accorded the highest place as man's basic virtue and the source of all other virtues. Rand describes pride as "moral ambitiousness" and strongly rejects "any doctrine that preaches self-immolation as a moral virtue or duty" (p. 22). With man's mind firmly fastened to his own bootstraps, pride provides the impetus for man to pluck himself out of the muck of altruism and hold himself suspended in self-space with a grim grin on his somber face as to himself he loudly lauds the virtue of selfishness. Rand affirms that "the basic *social* principle of Objectivist ethics is that just as life is an end in itself, so every living human being is an end in himself, not the means to the ends or the welfare of others — and, therefore, that man must live for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself. To live for his own sake means that *the achievement of his own happiness is man's highest moral purpose*" (pp. 22-23).

This stubborn egoistic stance seems to frighten the willy-nilly Christian and threaten to unmask the pious hypocrisy of those who must use or abuse others, often in the name of their god, in order to reach the place they feel they deserve in the sun. The good that many sporadically do for others is prompted only by an omnivorous appetite for a subsequent pie in the sky. According to Rand, "the principle of *trade* is the only rational ethical principle for all human relationships, personal and social, private and public, spiritual and material. It is the principle of *justice*" (p. 29).

She defines "a trader [as] a man who earns what he gets and does not . . . treat men as masters or slaves, but as independent equals. He deals with men by means of a free, voluntary, unforced, uncoerced exchange — an exchange which benefits both parties by their own independent judgment. A trader does not expect to be paid for his defaults, only for his achievements. He does not switch to others the burden of

his failures, and he does not mortgage his life into bondage to the failure of others' (p. 29).

This book consists of a collection of essays by Ayn Rand and a number of additional articles by Nathaniel Branden. After introducing the essential tenets of Objectivist ethics, the writers move into a wide range of contemporary problems such as intimidation, counterfeit individualism, racism, the nature of government, man's rights, the cult of moral grayness. They ask and ponder the questions: Isn't everyone selfish? Doesn't life require compromise? How does one lead a rational life in an irrational society?

In his reason-bound schema of reality, the Objectivist has no place for faith. He refers to it as "a malignancy that no system can tolerate with impunity," with the further qualification that "the man who succumbs to it, will call on it in precisely those issues where he needs his reason most" (p. 38). Despite all of his apparent air of bravado, the humanistic Objectivist seems to be whistling in the dark, a lonely itinerant without any "invisible" means of support. With his ultimate commitment to that which is less than ultimate, self, he cannot ever hope to regain that requisite relationship with his Maker and subsequent interaction with his fellow man, mediated by love, to acquire that wholeness which is holiness, which is blessedness, which is happiness.

65

## A Story of Friendship

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THE CHOSEN

By Chaim Potok

Simon and Schuster, Inc., New York, 1967 284 pp \$4.95 paper \$1.95

*The Chosen* is a moving story of both generational and religious conflict among Hasidic and orthodox Jews in the late 1940's. The incidents that take place in a tiny section of Williamsburg in Brooklyn have universal implications. The struggles of Jewry in this regional microcosm are parabolic of the quest of those of each generation and religion who see themselves as "the chosen." Through this remarkable book, which offers a great deal of information about the complexities of Talmudic study, the origins of Hasidism, and Jewish customs, Potok portrays the intricacy and poignancy of human relations.

The protagonists are two fifteen-year-old boys, sensitive Reuven Malter and brilliant but troubled Danny Saunders, and their fathers. Danny is a member of the ultraorthodox sect distinguished by earlocks, broadbrimmed hats, and long, black overcoats. His father, Reb Saunders, is a tzaddik, a Hasidic rabbi, who believes that his sect alone is fulfilling God's will. Custom demands that Danny follow his father