Logging into the online forum site Reddit yet again, I can’t help but think of Ayn Rand. Another commenter—convinced that my viewpoint, because it is different from his, must not be ‘rational’—has misrepresented and twisted an opinion I posted into an almost unrecognizable straw man argument. He might as well be the long-dead philosopher, reaching out to me in a thread about economic inequality to berate me for being a ‘Subjectivist.’

Rand probably would have liked Reddit. After all, its founding principle is freedom of speech, the economic views of its average user lean right, and it has a reputation as a ruggedly individualistic landscape. Anyone can comment, but only the best, most ‘upvoted’ comments are widely seen. The worst are hidden, minimized automatically when under a certain threshold of points. Reddit demonstrates many of ‘Objectivism’s’—that is, Rand’s philosophy’s—ideas in action.

In many ways, Objectivist ideas have become intertwined with American economics. Our conservative party’s aim to deregulate business, along with its stern propagation of individual merit as a means of overcoming hardship and achieving success, heavily reflect Rand’s worldview. And while prioritizing rationality, upholding the values of the free-market system, and hyper-valuing the individual are not ideals unique to Rand, she’s had a heavy influence in popularizing those ideas and normalizing them throughout Western society. This
has been, in part, thanks to Alan Greenspan, former Chairman of the Federal Reserve, once referred to by Jay Leno as “the most powerful man in the world” (Hitchens). Greenspan was a member of Rand’s inner circle, ‘the Collective’—a purposely ironic name, referencing Rand’s deep opposition to collectives as a detriment to individualism. Greenspan was hugely influenced by Rand’s ideas about economics and individual freedom—which informed his opposition to “anti-trust and consumer-protection laws” and the draft (Hitchens).

The influence of Objectivism permeates American culture. Our strong valuation of individualism, emphasis on hard work and talent as a direct means to success, and intense focus on ‘objective fact’ as the basis for any convincing argument about even subjective topics all speak to Randian ideals. But so what? What’s so wrong with individualism? Hard work? Being rational? In my view, nothing, inherently. But when presented in the unique design that Rand created, the results have devastating economic effects; in the wake of the Financial Crisis of 2008, even Greenspan himself admitted that he had “found a flaw” in the anti-regulation ideology, though he refused to accept blame for the collapse (Andrews). Beyond the purely economic, however, Rand’s ideas have had an immense effect on the way progressive politics are viewed and dealt with, and there is no greater site for observing these effects than the rugged outback of Internet forums and comment sections.

Before I delve much deeper into the effects of Rand and Objectivism, I want to backtrack a bit and examine Rand and her ideas to clarify my thinking. It seems fitting to introduce Rand on her own terms, so I’ll try to explain her as ‘objectively’ as possible. Rand was born in 1905 in Russia—just before the Bolshevik revolution—to a Jewish family and given the name Alisa Rosenbaum. During the revolution, her father’s pharmacy was seized “in the name of the people,” and, by her 21st birthday, knowing her outspoken tendencies would not bode well for her in Leninist Russia, her family sent her off to live in America. Upon arrival, she changed her name to Ayn Rand and sought to write stories to express her burgeoning philosophy: Objectivism (Hari).

Objectivism posits that there is one ‘objective’ reality which we can reach only through rationality. As Rand puts it, it is “the recogni-
tion of the fact that a perceiver’s (man’s) consciousness must acquire knowledge of reality by certain means (reason) in accordance with certain rules (logic)” (“Racism”). Additionally, Objectivism tells us that through these means, we discover that self-interest is the most rational, and therefore moral, way of living. Finally, it posits that capitalism optimizes rational self-interest through its protection of individual rights, and therefore is the only viable economic system (“Ayn Rand’s Ideas—An Overview”).

It’s hard to deny, especially from a privileged perspective, that Rand’s ideas are attractive. What person wouldn’t be thrilled to hear that by living only for themself, they are doing what’s best for everyone else as well? Rather than the typical tension between ‘doing whatever I want’ and ‘being a good person,’ the two become one and the same. She claims, even, that this approach to thinking can end social ills such as racial discrimination, positing that the “only” cure to racism is “the philosophy of individualism and its politico-economic corollary, laissez-faire capitalism” (“Racism”). It seems almost too good to be true, like a cure-all coming from a snake-oil peddler (who, incidentally, operates within his own self-interest). It all really seems to have sold well in the United States.

More interesting, arguably, than Rand’s philosophy, is the way she argues for it and against other ways of thinking. Her argument style has two main features: misrepresenting opposing sides, and taking her own ideas, before even proving them, as axioms. She often refuses to source the claims she uses to bolster her arguments. A good example of this comes from her own definition of Objectivism relative to the opposing ideology she calls ‘subjectivism.’

Rand tells us that subjectivism is “the belief that reality is not a firm absolute, but a fluid, plastic, indeterminate realm which can be altered, in whole or part, by the consciousness of the perceiver—i.e., by his feelings, wishes or whims” (“Who Is the Final Authority in Ethics?”). Given this definition of subjectivism, most people would reject subjectivism, as Rand does, as a fantasy and a delusional way of living. Her definition’s emphasis on the idea that one can alter one’s own reality depending on one’s “wishes or whims” makes subjectivism seem at best an extremely abstract way of viewing the world and at worst like a fantasy. However, subjectivism was already an existing
philosophy before Rand’s definition, and its more widely accepted definition is less abstract. Most dictionary definitions read something like the following: “the practice of giving priority to or laying emphasis on subjective consciousness, personal experience, etc.; any of various methods based on advocating this” (“subjectivism n.”).

In my view, the more accepted definition is vastly more reasonable than Rand’s. It’s a part of epistemology that’s widely accepted in sociology, whether in name or only in practice, as much of sociology emphasizes the role that hegemony plays in deciding what is ‘objective’ and what is wrong. Rand chose to define subjectivism as she did for a reason, and, given the difference in definitions, it’s reasonable to say that her misrepresentation was purposeful. Even if it were an honest mistake, it benefits her by painting her own ideology as comparatively ‘rational.’

Of course, such a disingenuous comparison with an invented version of ‘subjectivism’ was not even necessary, as Rand continues her argument in favor of Objectivism by establishing it as the only antidote to moral ills. One example she gives is racism, which she argues can only be ended through “the philosophy of individualism and its politico-economic corollary, laissez-faire capitalism” (“Racism”). In a fashion typical for her, Rand feels no need to prove this claim, simply assuranceing the reader that “racism has always risen or fallen with the rise of collectivism” (“Racism”). “Collectivism,” for Rand, is the rule over the individual by the group, a notion which she deeply despises assuming the reader shares her contempt for any dearth of individualism.

I strive to give credit where credit is due, and if anything can be said of Rand, for better or worse, it’s that she lived—and nearly died—by her philosophy. Potential contradictions within her ideology aside, Rand was no hypocrite. In an exhaustingly Objectivist display, Rand challenged the statistical evidence of the connection between smoking and lung cancer as “unscientific and irrational” (Levine). She had a small change of heart when she had to have surgery for the lung cancer that developed as a result of her smoking two packs a day. Yet while Rand quit, her followers respected her original assessment of the evidence and continued to smoke (Levine). The whole ordeal ended up as a possibly unintentional emulation of Dagny Taggart (the
only female protagonist of Rand’s ultimate fictional expression of Objectivism: *Atlas Shrugged*, who similarly disregarded the views of “the best metallurgical authorities” in choosing to buy an untested new metal alloy to use in building new railways (*Atlas Shrugged* 27). Fortunately for Ms. Taggart, Rand wrote her world so her protagonists’ high-risk decisions always paid off. Unfortunately for Rand, however, whoever wrote her world was not so generous, and refusing to seek outside, expert opinions is generally not wise.

All of this to say: Rand was a strongly principled woman who argued for the philosophy she truly believed was as rigorous and correct as a philosophy could be and who strove in every way to live by its principles. And, ultimately, she argued these principles well enough to gain respect from major economists and businessmen. According to a 1991 joint survey by The Library of Congress and the Book of the Month Club, Americans considered *Atlas Shrugged* the second most influential book, losing only to the Bible (Fein). And while the economic effects of Rand’s philosophies have been widely explored and critiqued, it’s her influence, as I noted before, on reactions to progressivism that concerns me.

The connection between Rand’s work and modern anti-social justice (hereafter referred to as ‘reactionary’) movements on the Internet is not tenuous by any stretch of the imagination. Whether they know it or not, reactionaries act in an Objectivist mindset. From Objectivism serving as an underlying philosophy in many reactionary arguments, to Rand’s outright support of some reactionary principles, the two were practically destined to intersect.

The primary way in which reactionaries are effectively Objectivist is in how they view the current world. Objectivist dogma relies on a world in which everyone has equal opportunities to succeed, and so hard work genuinely does translate into success. In such a world, hierarchies, power structures, oppression, and privilege are either negligible and can be overcome (as is the case with class) or do not provide significant hindrance outside of social ostracization (in the case of sexism and racism, among others). To reactionaries, oppressed groups such as women, Black people, gay people, transgender people, and others are not really oppressed; they can always get past it: the wage gap would close if women would just pick higher paying jobs, Black
people would be more respected if they would just pull up their pants, gay people would be accepted if they just didn’t act so gay, transgender people wouldn’t be murdered if they would just get surgeries until they acceptably passed as their gender (or better yet, were just ‘normal’). To put it another way, if they just pulled themselves up by their proverbial bootstraps, they could be as successful as their cisgender, straight, white male peers. This notion is the very core of Internet reactionary movements; after all, if they admitted there was a problem, they couldn’t assume their moral high ground without hiding their support of discrimination.

Let’s look again at Dagny Taggart, Rand’s self-insert heroine. Rand admits that many of her other characters do not find it “natural that [Dagny] should be the Operating Vice-President of a great railroad” because she is a woman, telling us that sexism does exist in some form in her imagined universe (Atlas Shrugged 24). But, in true Objectivist form, and in a fashion replicating reactionary fantasy, Taggart’s first realization that some might object to her running a railroad elicited from her only the response “to hell with that,” after which she “never worried about it again” (Atlas Shrugged 51). Taggart’s rise from a night operator at a railroad at age 16 to Vice President in Charge of Operation of the same line at 32 was “swift and uncontested” as a result of “[doing] the work before she was granted the title;” she represents a model worker for a laissez-faire capitalist economy (Atlas Shrugged 51).

Internet reactionaries also fall into the Objectivist trap of assuming their arguments and viewpoints are rational and objective when the opposite is often true. It’s hard to argue against an angry white man on the internet about how the cards are stacked against non-white people and women without him accusing you of being irrational or overly emotional for not seeing things the way he does. This understanding that hegemonic thought is rational thought is a perfect example of Objectivism in action: when one believes there is only a single way of seeing reality, one Truth, it’s easy to accuse anyone who doesn’t share your views of seeing the world incorrectly or through a subjective lens—as if all personal viewpoints weren’t by definition subjective.
An extremely visible and recent example of this comes in the form of GamerGate, the misogynistic harassment movement thinly veiled as fighting for the “integrity of games journalism” (Cox). A core complaint of the GamerGate movement was that video game reviews had become “subjective”—a few reviewers had decided to include misogyny and other similar social justice-related ideas as factors in their reviews of games like Grand Theft Auto. Arthur Chu, who makes a career writing about such internet movements, remarks that those who object to more inclusive reviewing practices are “convinced that their opinion is ‘objectively’ correct,” that is, that their opinion is factual, and therefore reviews they disagree with are incorrect, and “subjective” (Chu). Rand would have been pleased.

Beyond her merely ideological influence, Rand was an ardent supporter of free speech for even the most fascist among us, and directly opposed social justice-oriented policies, such as affirmative action. In a section of her article on racism, Rand basically echoes the ‘All Lives Matter’ catch-phrases regarding ‘white guilt’ and ‘reverse racism,’ explaining that “racial quotas . . . [demand] that white men be penalized for the sins of their ancestors” (“Racism”). This, I suppose, is an easy viewpoint to have when you think that the free market can solve racism on its own.

Ayn Rand and internet reactionaries are more similar than they are different, and the cultural climate Rand has influenced has contributed to their way of thinking. They seem to be growing in power and self-righteous fury. The aforementioned GamerGate movement spilled off out of the internet, harassing one woman to the point of committing suicide and bullying many others into leaving games journalism for good (Miller; Cox). The neo-Nazi website Stormfront has taken note of the climate of growing racial tension and aims to recruit new members, hoping to radicalize the casual racists of the internet (Biddle). These are the kinds of reactionary movements we are paying for today, and which may grow in the not so distant future.

Bruce Levine argues that Rand made us into an “uncaring nation,” and “[made] it ‘moral’ for the wealthy not to pay their fair share of taxes . . . [and] . . . ‘liberated’ millions of other Americans from caring about the suffering of others, even the suffering of their own children” (Levine). I think she’s done even more than that; I
think she’s fed hatred and bigotry, and fed an apathy toward the status quo that goes far beyond the economic and the personal. Rand unintentionally helped validate the hate from the worst among us as rational, placating many with the notion that we shouldn’t worry about oppression or discrimination or inequality. The free market will take care of it; it’s only rational, isn’t it?

WORKS CITED

Miller, Michael E. “Killed Myself. Sorry’: Transgender Game Developer Jumps Off Bridge After Online Abuse.” The