

THE MYTH ABOUT AYN RAND AND SOCIAL SECURITY

by [Onkar Ghate](#) | June 19, 2014

You know your critics are desperate when they accuse you of hypocrisy without bothering to investigate your stated principles. The desperation is especially palpable if you've explained how those principles apply to the very action you're being criticized for.

So it is with Ayn Rand and Social Security.

When fans voice her moral critique of the welfare state, many opponents respond by attacking her. She collected Social Security, they say, even though she opposed the program's very existence. What a hypocrite! But what a gift, because she's shown that her philosophy is unlivable. Case closed.

If only real thinking were this easy.

From the archival evidence I've seen, Rand did collect Social Security. But isn't it relevant that Rand argued *in print* for the consistency of this position, a fact any informed critic should know? We might end up disagreeing with Rand's analysis, but doesn't plain decency require that we first examine it? So let's do that.

Rand morally opposes the welfare state because she's an unwavering advocate of the individual's moral right to his life, his liberty, his earned property, and the pursuit of his own happiness. She viewed America as putting an end to the idea that the individual must live for king, neighbor or pope. For the first time in history the individual was declared free to live for himself. It was not handouts or entitlement programs that the millions of individuals who came to America's shores sought, but freedom. The freedom to rise as high as their minds, abilities and hard work would take them.

Rand argues that a country dedicated to individualism must oppose every "redistribution" of wealth for a simple but profound reason: it's not *our* wealth to redistribute. If I walk into your garage and drive your Camry across the street to your neighbor's garage, I haven't redistributed our "collective" wealth, I've stolen *yours*. If I help pass a law that allows the government to "redistribute" your Camry to your neighbor, I've only made the situation worse by legalizing the theft.

Yet this is what programs like Social Security do. In essence, Social Security seizes the money of a young worker and gives it to an older person to pay for his retirement. This is combined with the grisly hope, falsely labeled a promise, that when this young victim reaches retirement age, there will be enough new young workers earning enough money for the government to now victimize them to pay for his retirement.

What's moral about this? If you and I wrote a computer program to siphon a few percent from young people's bank accounts and deposit the proceeds into the accounts of the elderly, we would be branded criminals. What makes it moral if the government does it? The fact that a lot of us voted for it? Should we say the same about Prohibition or segregation laws?

Of course, proponents of Social Security will cite eighty-year-old ladies who, through misfortune, were unable to save enough for retirement and now live off of Social Security. Conveniently unmentioned and unseen are the young victims, whose earnings were seized: the young man who can't afford both to work and go to college, the young couple unable to put aside money for a down payment on a house, the young woman unable to save enough to start her own business.

Rand rejects the collectivist notion behind all these “redistribution” schemes: that individuals are the chess pieces of bureaucrats, who get to decide which pawns will be sacrificed and to whom. In America, each person must earn his own way. The pursuit of happiness does not guarantee you success. Those who fail, perhaps through no fault of their own, like the eighty-year-old lady, are free to seek the help of others. But there is no place for the idea, as Rand puts it, that “the misfortune of some is a mortgage on others.”

This is why Rand opposes every “redistribution” scheme of the welfare state.

Precisely because Rand views welfare programs like Social Security as legalized plunder, she thinks the *only* condition under which it is moral to collect Social Security is if one “*regards it as restitution and opposes all forms of welfare statism*” (emphasis hers). The seeming contradiction that only the opponent of Social Security has the moral right to collect it dissolves, she argues, once you recognize the crucial difference between the voluntary and the coerced.

Social Security is not voluntary. Your participation is forced through payroll taxes, with no choice to opt out even if you think the program harmful to your interests. If you consider such forced “participation” unjust, as Rand does, the harm inflicted on you would only be *compounded* if your announcement of the program’s injustice precludes you from collecting Social Security.

This being said, your moral integrity does require that you view the funds only as (partial) restitution for all that has been taken from you by such welfare schemes and that you continue, sincerely, to oppose the welfare state.

In contrast, the *advocate* of Social Security on Rand’s view is not the victim but the supporter of legalized plunder, whether he realizes it or not. This fact morally *disqualifies* him from accepting the spoils “redistributed” by the welfare state.

Rand’s position on the welfare state is no doubt controversial. But for critics to dismiss it as hypocrisy is a confession of ignorance or worse.

Unfortunately, there exists a long history of Rand’s opponents distorting her positions to attack straw men. With Rand now so prominent in our national debate, let’s try to raise the level of conversation and discuss her actual arguments.

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