

# “Sanction”: The Triumph of Ayn Rand’s Worst Idea

Ayn Rand is widely hated. Indeed, if you made a list of thinkers that people “love to hate,” she’d be near the top of the list. Liberals hate her. Conservatives hate her. Socialists hate her. Indeed, plenty of libertarians hate her. It’s hardly surprising, then, that she has not been broadly influential. While she has millions of fans, they’re only a tiny share of any country’s population. Even when her fans gain positions of power, they’re hopelessly outnumbered by powerful people who disagree.

There is, however, one notable exception. *One* of Ayn Rand’s ideas has spread far and wide. Indeed, it pervades social media. The idea: The virtue of moral intolerance. Here’s how Rand explained it back in 1962:

*One must never fail to pronounce a moral judgment.*

*Nothing can corrupt and disintegrate a culture or a man’s character as thoroughly as does the precept of moral agnosticism, the idea that one must never pass moral judgment on others, that one must be morally tolerant of anything, that the good consists of never distinguishing good from evil.*

*It is obvious who profits and who loses by such a precept. It is not justice or equal treatment that you grant to men when you abstain equally from praising men’s virtues and from condemning men’s vices. When your impartial attitude declares, in effect, that neither the good nor the evil may expect anything from you—whom do you betray and whom do you encourage? (emphasis original)*

In Randian jargon, we must never grant our intellectual enemies our “moral sanction.” Simply put, “[I]n no case and in no situation may one permit one’s own values to be attacked or denounced, and keep silent.” Building on this position, Rand’s inner circle ultimately denounced not only “sanctioning,” but “sanctioning the sanctioners.” Randian Peter Schwartz, who coined the latter phrase, elaborated:

*The weapon necessary to defend against evil is justice: the unequivocal identification of the evil as evil. This means the refusal to*

*grant it, by word or by deed, any moral respectability. It is by scrupulously withholding from the irrational even a crumb of a moral sanction — by rejecting any form of accommodation with the irrational — by forcing the irrational to stand naked and unaided — that one keeps evil impotent.*

What does this mean in practice? Don't talk to your intellectual enemies – and don't talk to people who talk to your intellectual enemies. Because they're your enemies too. Sure, you can denounce them; but you can't have a civilized conversation. Indeed, engaging in such a conversation practically makes you as bad as they are.\*

In my late teens, I knew many Randians who took the virtue of moral intolerance seriously. I partially bought into it myself; I was, after all, a teenage misanthrope. But the extreme forms always seemed crazy to me, and I gradually broadened my intellectual milieu. Once I was in my late-20s, I had so little contact with Randians that I gradually forgot about their self-conscious moral intolerance.

Over the last decade, however, the Randian virtue of moral intolerance has spread far and wide – especially on social media. All major political views now have outspoken exponents who self-consciously and self-righteously refuse to “sanction” unbelievers. Or “sanction those who sanction” them.

Is Rand really causally responsible for modernity's moral intolerance? Probably not; the lines of intellectual communication don't fit. Yet the fact remains: One of Rand's most peculiar positions has spread like wildfire.

Is this really such bad news? Yes. I lived in a subculture that embraced Rand's virtue of moral intolerance, and saw the devastation. Genuinely smart and nominally rational people were quick to take offense and afraid to ask questions. Indeed, many were so afraid to talk to the “wrong people” that they stayed in their Randian intellectual ghetto, parroting their guru and her appointed successors. Vocal free-thinkers were often purged. As a result, Randians were mired in error. When they were wrong (as they often were), they lacked the cognitive methods and social lifelines to *stop* being wrong.

The party line, of course, was that Randians had no need to root out error because they were so clearly and thoroughly right. Everyone outside of their ambit probably finds this megalomania comical, but the problem goes deeper than one Russian novelist's eccentricities. *Every* group that deems itself clearly and thoroughly right is deeply wrong due to (a) their dogmatic methods and (b) the complexity of the world. Including yours. Including mine. Talking to people who agree with you while talking *at* people who disagree

with you is a blueprint for building a Tower of Error.

Still, Randian moral intolerance did have one saving grace: It was a tiny subculture. Anyone who had enough could easily walk away. If the perceived virtue of moral intolerance continues to mainstream, where will curiosity find a new home?

This doesn't mean we should listen respectfully to everyone. Personally, I draw the line at avowed Communists and Nazis. They really are unworthy of a response; therefore, I don't respond to them. Nevertheless, we should still listen respectfully to a wide range of views. Perhaps your opponents are intellectually dishonest, but if you don't listen respectfully, it's very hard to tell. Indeed, even if you *do* listen respectfully, it's hard to tell. I can't read minds; can you? In any case, if you want to understand the world, you should focus on the truth of the message, not the morals of the messenger. Tolerantly engaging a wide range of viewpoints is a vital reality check. Ayn Rand badly needed this check. So do you.

\* I'm well-aware that Rand enjoined her readers to judge others judiciously:

*The opposite of moral neutrality is not a blind, arbitrary, self-righteous condemnation of any idea, action or person that does not fit one's mood, one's memorized slogans or one's snap judgment of the moment. Indiscriminate tolerance and indiscriminate condemnation are not two opposites: they are two variants of the same evasion.*

But in practice, Rand almost never criticized *anyone* for indiscriminate condemnation – and her movement largely followed suit.