

## FIRST PLACE



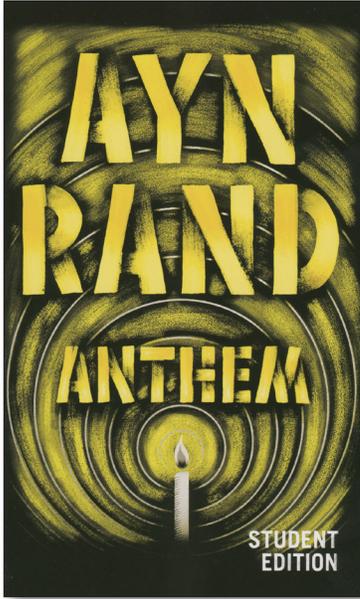
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**Do you think that Equality 7-2521 is selfish? In your answer, give examples from the story that support your answer. In what ways is Equality’s approach to life and to the other characters in the story similar to or different from what we normally think of as “selfish”? What lessons do you draw from the story about what it means to pursue your own interests?**

Modern society often associates “selfishness” with greed and evil. The negative connotation underlying this word can also be found in the definition from Merriam-Webster: “concerned excessively or exclusively with oneself: seeking . . . one’s own advantage . . . without regard for others.” On the other hand, Ayn Rand’s *Anthem* sheds light on the true definition of selfishness, following the heroic Equality whose unadulterated selfishness is the foundation of life. His bold egotism liberates him from the oppressive rules of collectivism, allowing him to freely pursue knowledge of how to fulfill his life and prosper as a man of dignity.

Selfish people are commonly viewed as those who pursue their self-interest at the expense of others, or those who steal and exploit others for undeserved privilege. Thus, to be “selfish,” people must always be thinking about—not their own desires and needs—but how to subdue others. However, this statement is contradictory because someone whose life revolves around others is selfless, not selfish. Moreover, the exploitation of others cannot lead to any self-benefiting gains, as no one can fulfill the needs of another person. For example, the Councils may obtain power, but that power does not provide them with anything of value in an absolute sense. Their social achievement does not improve their quality of life, nor do they achieve happiness. Because their success is an illusion, they constantly live in fear of losing out, causing them to pour resources into suppressing others’ individuality and consecrating all sources of regress such as irrationality and unproductiveness. The World Council of Scholars, for example, cannot even enjoy Equality’s light box. In effect, the Councils gain hollow achievements at the cost of not only their subjects but also their own well-being; thus, selfish is not the correct term to describe the looters.

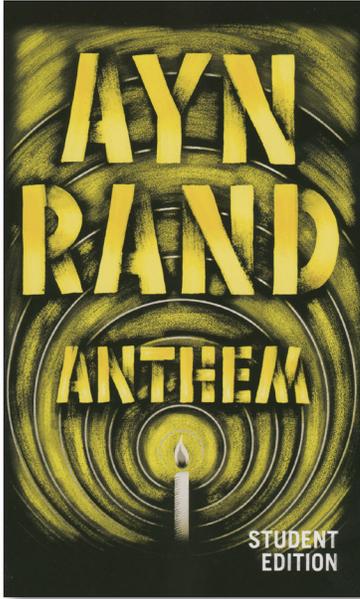
On the other hand, Equality is truly selfish in that he pays no attention to anything or anyone irrelevant to his life, such as the City’s artificial rules or the mindless citizens. Instead, he spends time “[looking] too long at the stars at night, and at the trees and the earth” (7) and studying nature, “[melting] strange metals . . . [mixing] acids, and [cutting] open the bodies of the animals” (10). He wants to “study the earth and learn from the rivers, from the sands, from the winds and the rocks” (5) because knowledge of nature is where “all the



great modern inventions come from” (5). He is right in this observation. Nature is the metaphysical foundation of all life, so understanding and accepting nature must precede the pursuit of life. As Equality is a selfish man who is ambitious to live, instead of being intimidated by the mysteries of nature, he is intrigued by them, seeks to make discoveries, and exploit nature for great inventions. As a result of his scientific endeavors, he can better fulfill his needs, elevate his life quality, and ensure a successful life on Earth.

Seeking knowledge firsthand, Equality evaluates and selfishly chooses values to be pursued. The values are his desires, and the achievement of values is rewarded with happiness. Even in the beginning when Equality does not “choose” but passively “accepts” the “Great WE,” what distinguishes him from the puppet-like residents is that his compliance is a willful—not automatic or purposeless—act fueled by his selfish desire to be virtuous. He deliberately fights hard against what he considers to be his “curse,” trying to “not to understand what the Teachers taught” and “accept our Life Mandate . . . gladly and willingly” (6). In the end, he realizes the pursuit of collectivist values does not lead to happiness, concluding that “if this is a vice, then we wish no virtue” (15). Noteworthy is that he is able to realize and rectify his mistaken view of morality because of his selfish spirit. His awareness of profound joy after pursuing his values—science and Liberty—causes him to realize that his values must be chosen by himself. While other mindless people take their misery for granted, Equality is neither indifferent nor oblivious to his suffering—this is what makes Equality selfish. He jumps at whatever opportunity to satisfy his personal desires, taking conscious actions—such as visiting the underground tunnel every night, conducting experiments, stealing manuscripts, and speaking to Liberty—to carry out his wishes and derive joy. Equality prioritizes his values and happiness above all things.

While selfishness is often linked to destructive and uncaring traits, Equality is the most generous and compassionate character in *Anthem*. Upon inventing the light box, he courteously presents it to the Scholars and seeks to cooperate with them for greater achievement. He says: “We give you the key to the earth! Take it, and let us be one of you. . . . Let us all work together” (25). His respectful offer and humane treatment of the Scholars are not despite but due to his selfishness. He seeks to cooperate because he doesn’t view them as threatening rivals. Rather, he believes them to be intellectually driven beings. Moreover, Equality is so confident in himself that he is willing to bring positivity to humanity. For example, he is excited to give his brothers “a new light, cleaner and brighter than any they have ever known” (21). Also, after escaping the City and understanding the individualist philosophy in the Uncharted Forest, he is motivated to establish a new community and invite his peers trapped in the City. Because he is a truly independent man who needs not compare himself with others, he can extend a warm heart to other people, rescue them from the City’s spiritual slaughter, and drive human progress.



Of course, his benevolence does not mean that Equality sacrifices himself for those unworthy of him. His kindness is not because he feels indebted to others. Equality pursues relationships selfishly, maintaining relationships only when he can derive selfish pleasure from the other person. For example, he is drawn to Liberty and International only because of their admirable qualities. Meanwhile, he refuses to form friendship with those that evoke repugnant feelings—such as the sickly Union or the repulsive Scholars. To love the inferior and evil means to extract pleasure out of them; however, he would have to compromise his values to do so. Equality is a selfish man seeking selfish people with whom he can pursue happiness together.

In a society that denounces selfishness, people are discouraged from pursuing their self-interest or from being too ambitious. However, no one should be pressured into giving up their potential for a successful, happy life. For example, high-achieving students should never refrain from raising their hands or from contributing “too much” to be “considerate” of their less motivated peers. Meanwhile, selflessness is extremely deceptive. It appears peaceful not because it promotes a harmonious coexistence of all, but because a sense of duty and guilt suppress individuality. A collectivist group composed of selfless members is stagnant, unproductive, and driven by fear. In the end, selflessness cannot drive the success of any individual or the progress of society. To live, there must be an “I”—the subject that thinks, chooses, and acts on the chosen values. Everyone should place “I” as the center of their values, selfishly honoring and serving their own life’s interests.