**[How Does One Lead A Rational Life In An Irrational Society?](https://thecriticalthinker.wordpress.com/critical-thinking/rational-life/)**

by Ayn Rand—1962
I will confine my answer to a single, fundamental aspect of this question. I will name only one principle, the opposite of the idea which is so prevalent today and which is responsible for the spread of evil in the world. That principle is: *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?

But to pronounce a moral judgment is an enormous responsibility. To be a judge, one must possess an unimpeachable character; one need not be omniscient or infallible, and it is not an issue of errors of knowledge; one needs an un-breached integrity, that is, the absence of any indulgence in conscious, wilful evil. Just as a judge in a court of law may err, when the evidence is inconclusive, but may not evade the evidence available, nor accept bribes, nor allow any personal feeling, emotion, desire or fear to obstruct his mind’s judgment of the facts of reality—so every rational person must maintain an equally strict and solemn integrity in the courtroom within his own mind, where the responsibility is more awesome than in a public tribunal, because he, the judge, is the only one to know when he has been impeached.

There is, however, a court of appeal from one’s judgments: objective reality. A judge puts himself on trial every time he pronounces a verdict. It is only in today’s reign of amoral cynicism, subjectivism and hooliganism that men may imagine themselves free to utter any sort of irrational judgment and to suffer no consequences. But, in fact, a man is to be judged by the judgments he pronounces. The things which he condemns or extols exist in objective reality and are open to the independent appraisal of others. It is his own moral character and standards that he reveals, when he blames or praises. If he condemns America and extols Soviet Russia—or if he attacks businessmen and defends juvenile delinquents—or if he denounces a great work of art and praises trash—it is the nature of his own soul that he confesses.

It is their fear of this responsibility that prompts most people to adopt an attitude of indiscriminate moral neutrality. It is the fear best expressed in the precept: “Judge no, that ye be not judged.” But that precept, in fact, is an abdication of moral responsibility: it is a moral blank check one gives to others in exchange for a moral blank check one expects for oneself.

There is no escape from the fact that men have to make choices; so long as men have to make choices, there is no escape from moral values; so long as moral values are at stake, no moral neutrality is possible. To abstain from condemning a torturer, is to become an accessory to the torture and murder of his victims.

The moral principle to adopt in this issue, is: “Judge, and be prepared to be judged.”

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. To declare that “everybody is white” or “everybody is black” or “everybody is neither white nor black, but gray,” is not a moral judgment, but an escape from the responsibility of moral judgment.

To judge means: to evaluate a given concrete by reference to an abstract principle or standard. It is not an easy task; it is not a task that can be performed automatically by one’s feelings, “instincts” or hunches. It is a task that requires the most precise, the most exacting, the most ruthlessly objective and rational process of thought. It is fairly easy to grasp abstract moral principles; it can be very difficult to apply them to a given situation, particularly when it involves the moral character of another person. When one pronounces moral judgment whether in praise or in blame, one must be prepared to answer “Why?” and to prove one’s case—to oneself and to any rational inquirer.

The policy of always pronouncing moral judgment does not mean that one must regard oneself as a missionary charged with the responsibility of “saving everyone’s soul”—nor that one must give unsolicited moral appraisals to all those one meets. It means: (a) that one must know clearly, in full, verbally identified form, one’s own moral evaluation of every person, issue and event with which one deals, and act accordingly; (b) that one must make one’s moral evaluation known to others, when it is rationally appropriate to do so.

This last means that one need not launch into unprovoked moral denunciations or debates, but that one must speak up in situations where silence can objectively be taken to mean agreement with or sanction of evil. When one deals with irrational persons, where argument is futile, a mere “I don’t agree with you” is sufficient to negate any implication of moral sanction. When one deals with better people, a full statement of one’s views may be morally required. But in no case and in no situation may one permit one’s own values to be attacked or denounced, and keep silent.

Moral values are the motive power of man’s actions. By pronouncing moral judgment, one protects the clarity of one’s own perception and the rationality of the course one chooses to pursue. It makes a difference whether one thinks that one is dealing with human errors of knowledge or with human evil.

Observe how many people evade, rationalize and drive their minds into a state of blind stupor, in dread of discovering that those they deal with—their “loved ones” or friends or business associates or political rulers—are not merely mistaken, but evil. Observe that this dread leads them to sanction, to help and to spread the very evil whose existence they fear to acknowledge.

If people did not indulge in such abject evasions as the claim that some contemptible liar “means well”—that a mooching bum “can’t help it”—that a juvenile delinquent “needs love”—that a criminal “doesn’t know any better”—that a power-seeking politician is moved by patriotic concern over “the public good”—that communists are merely “agrarian reformers”—the history of the past few decades, or centuries, would have been different.

Ask yourself why totalitarian dictatorships find it necessary to pour money and effort into propaganda for their own helpless, chained, gagged slaves, who have no means of protest or defense. The answer is that even the humblest peasant or the lowest savage would rise in blind rebellion, were he to realize that he is being immolated, not to some incomprehensible “noble purpose,” but to plain, naked human evil.

Observe also that moral neutrality necessitates a progressive sympathy for vice and a progressive antagonism to virtue. A man who struggles not to acknowledge that evil is evil, finds it interestingly dangerous to acknowledge that the good is the good. To him, a person of virtue is a threat that can topple all of his evasions—particularly when an issue of justice is involved, which demands that he take sides. It is then that such formulas as “Nobody is ever fully right or fully wrong” and “Who am I to judge?” take their lethal effect. The man who begins by saying: “There is some good in the worst of us,” goes on to say: “There is some bad in the best of us”—then: “There’s got to be some bad in the best of us”—and then: “It’s the best of us who make life difficult—why don’t they keep silent?—who are they to judge?”

And then, on some gray, middle-aged morning, such a man realizes suddenly that he has betrayed all the values he had loved in his distant spring, and wonders how it happened, and slams his mind shut to the answer, by telling himself hastily that the fear he had felt in his worst, most shameful moments was right and that values of no chance in this world.

An irrational society is a society of moral cowards—of men paralyzed by the loss of moral standards, principles and goals. But since men have to act, so long as they live, such a society is ready to be taken over by anyone willing to set its direction. The initiative can come from only two types of men: either from the man who is willing to assume the responsibility of asserting rational values—or from the thug who is not troubled by questions of responsibility.

No matter how hard the struggle, there is only one choice that a rational can make in the face of such an alternative.