
Selfishness is Good?

Video Length: 6:38

Lesson Description:

Is selfishness always a bad thing? This video explores how acting in your own self-interest—without cheating or stealing—can actually make the world better by creating jobs, lowering prices, and improving lives. Using real-world examples and ideas from Ayn Rand and Thomas Sowell, it challenges students to rethink what they know about capitalism, selfishness, and progress.

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- identify examples from the video that show how self-interest can benefit others.
- explain the difference between selfishness that harms and self-interest that helps.
- analyze how voluntary exchanges create win-win outcomes in a free market.
- evaluate the argument that self-interested behavior can lead to greater societal progress.

Concepts & Key Terms:

Capitalism: an economic system where individuals and businesses own property and compete freely to make goods and services for profit.

Competition: the effort by businesses to attract customers by offering better products, services, or prices than others.

Entrepreneur: a person who starts and runs a business, taking on financial risks in hopes of making a profit.

Objectivism: a philosophy developed by Ayn Rand that says people should live by reason, pursue their own happiness, and act in their own self-interest without forcing others to serve them.

Self-interest: focusing on actions and decisions that benefit oneself in the long run, without hurting others.

Preview Activity:

Use Think, Pair, Share to have students answer and discuss these preview questions: What do you think of when you hear the word "selfish"? Can acting in your own best interest ever be good for other people too? How does competition between businesses affect the choices we have as customers?

OR Distribute copies of the K-W-L worksheet to the class. Have students fill in the K and W sections. After showing the video, have students complete the L section and answer the questions at the bottom of the worksheet.

Viewing Guide:

We recommend that teachers show the video twice: first to allow students to view the video and focus on the issues presented, and second to allow them time to

complete the viewing guide. After they complete the viewing guide, allow students a few minutes to work in pairs to share and verify answers.

Answers to Viewing Guide

- | | |
|------------|-----------|
| 1. villain | 4. better |
| 2. cheaper | 5. racial |
| 3. profit | 6. world |

Selfishness is Good?

Viewing Guide

Name _____

Date _____

Class _____

Teacher _____

Directions: As you watch the video, fill in the blanks with the correct words.

1. The biggest problem we have in our culture is this perception, when you pursue your own self-interest, that you are somehow a _____.
2. The private sector routinely builds things that get _____ and better.
3. The world gets richer because entrepreneurs pursue _____.
4. But the reality is that what makes the world move, actually makes the world progress and makes our lives _____, is trading.
5. If it's not win-win like that, people won't buy. This pursuit of profit even fights _____ discrimination.
6. Self-interested motivation makes the _____ a better place.

Take a few moments to reflect on the video and answer these questions.

What is the difference between self-interest and selfishness? _____

If a business opens strictly because the owner wants to make money, how does that help the community and other people? _____

Discussion and Analysis

1. What is selfishness, according to the video?
2. What is the difference between selfishness and self-interest?
3. What examples did the video give of businesses helping people while making a profit?
4. How does competition between businesses help customers?
5. Why do businesses have to lower their prices over time?
6. What does Ayn Rand mean by "rational self-interest"?
7. How does voluntary trade create win-win situations?
8. What was the difference between the government building the high-speed train and the private company building trains in Florida?
9. Why do entrepreneurs need to make other people's lives better in order to succeed?
10. If an individual starts a business just to make money, how can that benefit other people around him/her?
11. How does the video challenge the idea that sharing is always better than trading?
12. How did the profit motive help fight racial discrimination according to the video?
13. How is selfishness connected to love and family, based on what the video explained?
14. Why might people wrongly believe capitalism is bad and socialism is good?
15. Do you agree that acting in your own self-interest can help others? Why or why not?
16. How could viewing self-interest as positive change the way people see business and capitalism?
17. What might happen if no one cared about their own self-interest?
18. Can a society built on self-interest also be compassionate? Why or why not?
19. How might media or school influence how we feel about people who pursue profit?

Discuss These Lines from the Video:

Self-interest is a good thing.

The only way you can make money in business is by providing customers with a value.

Being selfish is not the same as being an a*****.

Living for yourself is selfish, it's better to share.

What actually makes the world progress and makes our lives better is trading.

Under socialism, political leaders decide what's good for us. Under capitalism, individuals decide.

In a true marketplace, discrimination can exist, but it doesn't exist for very long.

Love is the most selfish of all emotions.

Quotes for Discussion:

By pursuing his own interest [the individual] frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.

– Adam Smith

There is one and only one social responsibility of business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game.

– Milton Friedman

Each man must live as an end in himself and follow his own rational self-interest.

– Ayn Rand

Focusing solely on profit leads to short-sighted decisions and ultimately undermines long-term success.

– Ron Shaich

To offset the apparent unfairness of capitalism, we need all the evidence we can get that capitalists themselves are not selfish.

– Charles Handy

There is some self-interest behind every friendship. There is no friendship without self-interest. This is a bitter truth.

– Chanakya

Even wisdom has to yield to self-interest.

– Pindar

People acting in their own self-interest is the fuel for all the discovery, innovation, and prosperity that powers the world.

– John Stossel

Activities:

1. Have students complete the K-W-L chart in class or for homework. (Recall that the K and W sections are to be completed before watching the video and the L section after watching the video.)

2. Have students complete the political cartoon activity in class or for homework.
3. Have students complete the PMI chart in class or for homework.
4. Have students complete and submit the Exit Ticket as they leave class.
5. Have students choose one line from the video that they find interesting or controversial. They will write a short paragraph explaining whether they agree or disagree with it and why.
6. In small groups, create a mock marketplace where you each "sell" simple classroom items (like pencils or erasers). Try to make trades that leave everyone happy. Discuss how this activity relates to the idea of voluntary exchange. For guidance on how to run a more elaborate version of this activity, watch this video:

Win Win – A Trading Game <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jm-wkE3gJxc>

7. Individually, students keep a journal for one day, recording decisions they made that served their own interests. They then reflect: Did any of those decisions also help others? If so, how?
8. Split the class into groups. Half argue that selfishness helps society, and half argue that selfishness hurts society. Each group presents their best case.
9. Students: Imagine you are starting a for-profit company. Create a one-page description of your business idea, what product or service you offer, and how it benefits both you, your customers, and the community at large.
10. Have students choose one vocabulary word from the lesson. They create a concept map showing what the word means, examples from the video, and real-world examples they can think of.
11. After learning about Ayn Rand's idea of rational self-interest, students will create a one-page visual summary that explains her view in words and pictures.
12. Students create a T-chart comparing socialism and capitalism based on how the video describes them. They then add their own ideas about pros and cons of each.
13. Students describe in their own words why both sides say "thank you" after a trade. Then they pair with a partner to compare ideas, then share with the class.
14. Individually or in pairs, students create a meme that captures one idea from the video, like voluntary trade or rational self-interest, using humor or irony.
15. Students research a real entrepreneur who built a company that helped improve people's lives. Then they write a short (one page) report explaining how their success helped others. An excellent resource for this is izzit.org's *Steve Forbes on Achievement* collection of short videos: <https://izzit.org/forbes/>

16. Individually or with a partner, create a two-column chart. On one side, list examples of rational self-interest (from the video or your own ideas). On the other side, list examples of selfishness that hurts others. Then write a short reflection explaining how the two are different.
17. Individually, research a little more about Ayn Rand's life and her philosophy called Objectivism. Read a short excerpt from one of her famous books (*Atlas Shrugged* or *The Virtue of Selfishness*). Then write a short reflection (one or two paragraphs) explaining how her ideas about self-interest connect to what was discussed in the video. Have students share one interesting fact or idea they learned with the class. Here are some optional reflection prompts you can use with your students:
 - Do you agree with Ayn Rand's idea that living for yourself can be moral and good? Why or why not?
 - How did Ayn Rand's background and life experiences seem to shape her ideas about self-interest and freedom?
 - After reading a short excerpt from her work, what part of her argument stood out to you the most, and why?
 - What similarities or differences do you see between Rand's ideas and the examples shown in the video?
 - How might Rand's views on selfishness challenge what most people are taught about helping others?

Name _____
Class _____ Period _____

Date _____
Teacher _____

Selfishness is Good?

K-W-L Chart

Directions: Complete the **K** and **W** sections prior to watching the video. After you have seen the video, complete the **L** section and answer the questions below the K-W-L chart.

K			W	L
What I know about self-interest, capitalism, and helping others...			What I want to know about self-interest, capitalism, and helping others...	What I've learned about self-interest, capitalism, and helping others...

What new ideas about self-interest and capitalism did you learn from the video? _____

Why might some people misunderstand how self-interest can create good for others? _____

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Selfishness is Good?
PMI Chart

P = Plus: What might be some pluses of self-interest?
M = Minus: What might be some minuses of self-interest?
I = Interesting: What is interesting about self-interest?

<div>+ Pluses +</div>	<div>- Minuses -</div>	<div>I</div>

How does self-interest help others? _____

Why do entrepreneurs need to make other people's lives better in order to succeed? _____

Name _____

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Selfishness is Good?

Political Cartoon Activity

Directions: Use the political cartoon to answer the questions.



What message is this cartoon sending about the connection between profit and jobs? _____

How does this cartoon challenge the idea that making money is always selfish?

Do you think it's a problem if someone helps others as a side-effect, not as the goal? Why or why not? _____

How might this cartoon change someone's opinion about business owners or capitalism? _____

Transcript: Selfishness is Good?

Bernie Sanders:

Corporate America, stop the greed.

John Stossel:

Democrats and Republicans criticize corporate greed.

Sen. Josh Hawley:

You're trying to squeeze every piece of profit you can out of this country—this company.

John Stossel:

They say this corporate greed kills good things.

Mr. Burns (The Simpsons):

Family, religion, friendship. These are the three demons you must slay if you wish to succeed in business!

John Stossel:

No, says Yaron Brook.

Yaron Brook:

The only way you can make money in business is by providing customers with a value.

John Stossel:

Brook heads the Ayn Rand Institute. Rand's popular books suggest self-interest is a good thing.

Yaron Brook:

The biggest problem we have in our culture is this perception—when you pursue your own self-interest—that you are somehow a villain.

John Stossel:

The opposite's true, he says. Entrepreneurs are actually heroes because the only way they can make money is...

Yaron Brook:

...by making the lives of other people better.

Steve Jobs:

We are calling it iPhone.

[Audience cheers]

John Stossel:

Governments sometimes build things, but when they do, they do it badly.

Seventeen years after California promised this high-speed rail, no actual train exists, yet the cost keeps going up.

News Anchor:

The cost of California's long-delayed high-speed rail system has skyrocketed once again.

John Stossel:

By contrast, in Florida, in much less time, a "selfish" privately owned, profit-seeking corporation built trains that carry commuters and tourists—without billing taxpayers. The private sector routinely builds things that get cheaper and better. It's why the price of things like cameras, computers, and TVs has dropped—even as quality improved. Why? Why would greedy people, looking to make more money, end up lowering prices?

John Stossel (answering):

Because they have to! Unlike government, they have competition. And those greedy competitors want your money, too. So they all have to lower prices!

John Stossel:

Rand was a philosopher who understood that entrepreneurs pursuing profit create wealth for others. Her book *Atlas Shrugged* sold ten million copies. In this movie version, a government judge attacks a steel entrepreneur's profit.

Judge (Atlas Shrugged movie):

How does that benefit your fellow man?

Industrialist:

Thousands of jobs, billions in revenue, fueling our economy—despite your efforts.

John Stossel:

This is just true.

The world gets richer because entrepreneurs pursue profit.

John Stossel:

But so many people hate Ayn Rand for celebrating that.

Here's John Oliver's show:

Narrator (John Oliver Show):

Ayn Rand became famous for her philosophy of Objectivism, which is a nice way of saying "being a selfish a*****."

Yaron Brook:

Being selfish is not the same as being an a*****.

John Stossel:

Objectivists define selfishness not as lying, cheating, stealing, or backstabbing...

Yaron Brook:

...but as your rational, long-term self-interest. What is truly good for you, John? What will make my life the best life it can be? And she is smeared constantly.

John Stossel:

Constantly.

Yaron Brook:

Constantly.

John Stossel:

And yet, her books are popular.

Yaron Brook:

Books are popular, yet the philosophy itself is smeared because it goes against at least 2,000 years of philosophy that tells us the purpose of life and morality is to suffer, sacrifice, and live for others. And she asks this really simple question: Why? Why shouldn't I live for myself?

John Stossel:

Because it's nice! Living for yourself is selfish. It's better to share.

Baby Bop (Barney the Dinosaur):

Sharing does make you feel good inside!

John Stossel:

We're taught from a young age that collective ownership—sharing—is best.

Barney the Dinosaur:

See? It's not so tough to share your stuff!

John Stossel:

We like that. I like that.

Yaron Brook:

Yeah, sharing sounds fantastic. It sounds nice. But the reality is that what makes the world move, actually makes the world progress and makes our lives better, is trading.

Pawn Stars Buyer:

Five grand is a deal.

Pawn Stars Seller:

Fair enough. Thank you.

Yaron Brook:

Creating relationships of win-win.

John Stossel:

You're saying the kid shouldn't share in the sandbox?

Yaron Brook:

We should teach our kids to think about, "What am I getting for this?" But just inculcating this idea of guilt into the kid—that is maybe why we live in a world where socialism is still viewed as morally noble and beautiful, and capitalism is evil and bad.

John Stossel:

Under socialism, political leaders decide what's good for us. Under capitalism, individuals decide. So even the greediest capitalist must offer us choices because no transaction happens unless it's win-win. It's why, when we buy something, there's this peculiar double "thank-you" moment.

Pretzel Vender:

Thank you.

John Stossel:

Thank you. Why did we both say thank you? Because I wanted the pretzel more than my dollar. He wanted my dollar more than the pretzel. If it's not win-win like that, people won't buy. This pursuit of profit even fights racial discrimination.

George Wallace (archival):

Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! And segregation forever!

John Stossel:

It was government that enforced Jim Crow laws. Private bus companies, looking to make money, opposed them. Even sued to desegregate. As economist Thomas Sowell put it:

Thomas Sowell:

Only whites could vote, but whites and blacks could both supply money.

Yaron Brook:

There's enormous profit motive in being the one that allows everybody into your restaurant. You're going to get a much larger clientele.

John Stossel:

Some people would still be racist.

Yaron Brook:

Some people would be racist.

John Stossel:

But...

Yaron Brook:

They would suffer the consequence of being racist.

John Stossel:

They'd lose customers.

Yaron Brook:

In a true marketplace, discrimination can exist, but it doesn't exist for very long.

John Stossel:

Ayn Rand said selfishness is even what makes us love our families.

Yaron Brook:

I love my wife for self-interested reasons. Imagine going to the woman you're going to marry and saying, "I'm not doing this for me. This is a massive sacrifice." She would slap you in the face—as she should! Instead, you should say, "I'm doing this because it's fun to be around you. It brings me joy. Me joy!" Love is the most selfish of all emotions.

John Stossel:

The *Virtue of Selfishness*, as Rand called it, is why world poverty has dropped dramatically. Over the past 50 years, the number of people in the world living on less than \$2 a day fell from 35% to just 9%. For most people, life's getting better.

Yaron Brook:

Self-interested motivation makes the world a better place.

John Stossel:

We should thank selfish capitalism!

Name

Admit One

Admit One

Is self-interest a good thing? Why or why not?

EXIT TICKET

Name

Admit One

Admit One

Is self-interest a good thing? Why or why not?

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