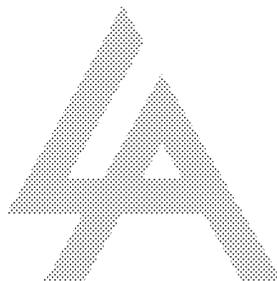


# AYN RAND ON OBLIGATION AND VALUE

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What is the relationship between Rand's theory of obligation and her theory of value? That is to say, what is the relationship between her account of how one determines what one ought to do and her account of what is of ultimate value? I will attempt to answer this question. However, I do not see this paper as offering a definitive answer to this question. Rather, the ideas expressed here are offered for the purpose of initiating a deeper examination of her position. Further, I want to make it clear that my purpose is not primarily to defend or attack Rand's philosophical claims. Instead, my goal is to achieve a better understanding of her ethical thought.

## Rand's Theory of Obligation

Let us consider the following statements by Rand regarding the source of obligation.

My morality, the morality of reason, is contained in a single axiom: existence exists — and in a single choice: to live. The rest proceeds from these.<sup>1</sup>

Life or death is man's only fundamental alternative. To live is his basic act of choice. If he chooses to live, a rational ethics will tell him what principles of action are required to implement his choice. If he does not choose to live, nature will take its course.

Reality confronts man with a great many "musts," but all of them are conditional, the formula for realistic necessity is: "You must, if —" and "if" stands for man's choice: "— if you want to achieve a certain goal." You must eat, if you want to survive. You must work, if you want to eat. You must think — if you want to know what to do — if you want to know what goals to choose — if you want to know how to achieve them.<sup>2</sup>

It would appear from these statements, especially the one from her essay, "Causality Versus Duty", that Rand is rejecting the idea that one can have any moral obligations apart from one's choice to attain a goal. Indeed, later in the same essay she describes the man who follows her ethics as "accepting no mystic 'duties' or unchosen obligations". "He is the man who honors scrupulously the obligations which he chooses."<sup>3</sup> All moral necessity would seem then to be of the hypothetical variety for Rand. It follows from one's choice to live.

Rand also endorses the idea that it is the goal of an action that determines the proper means. She has, to say the least, no use for deontologism. She rejects *in toto* the idea that moral obligation could stem from duty alone, apart from a consideration of a person's goals, motives, desires, interests, and needs.

In order to make the choices required to achieve his goals, a man needs the constant, automatized awareness of the principle which the anti-concept "duty" has all but obliterated in his mind — the principle of causality-specifically, of Aristotelian *final causation* (which, in fact, applies only to a conscious being), i.e., the process by which an end determines the means, i.e., the process of choosing a goal and taking the actions necessary to achieve it.

In a rational ethics it is causality — not "duty" — that serves as the guiding principle in considering, evaluating, and choosing one's actions, particularly those necessary to achieve a long range goal ... In choosing a goal, he considers the means required to achieve it, he weighs the value of the goal against the difficulties of the means and against the full, hierarchical context of all his other values and goals.

...

The notion of "duty" is intrinsically anti-causal. In its origin, a "duty" defies the principle of efficient causa-

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tion — since it is causeless (or supernatural); in its effects, it defies the principle of final causation — since it is performed regardless of the consequences.<sup>4</sup>

Her theory of obligation seems consequentialistic. What determines whether an action ought to be taken depends on whether it will attain the goal chosen by the person. There can be no such thing as doing something from a motive of duty, viz., simply because one ought to.

Of the many issues raised by Rand's comments regarding the nature of obligation, the one which seems to be of primary importance is the claim that moral obligation is hypothetical in character. This seems to lead to a most unusual situation for Rand's ethics — namely, that one can, so to speak, choose to opt out of the "moral game". If all moral obligations are hypothetical in character, that is, if the determination of what we ought or ought not do is only possible if we have chosen to live, then the decision to either live or not to live would seem incapable of moral evaluation by Rand's ethics. No reasons or recommendations could be given as to why one ought to choose to live or choose not to live. Choosing to live or choosing not to live would seem to be an ultimate human option that is beyond the scope of ethics. Morally speaking, the choice not to live would be just as good (or bad) as the choice to live. Or, so it seems.

Nathaniel Branden in his essay, "The Moral Revolution in *Atlas Shrugged*", states that "the man who does not wish to hold life as his goal and standard is free not to hold it; but he cannot claim the sanction of reason: he cannot claim that his *choice* is as valid as any other. It is not 'arbitrary,' it is not 'optional,' whether or not man accepts his nature as a living being — just as it is not 'arbitrary' or 'optional' whether or not he accepts reality."<sup>5</sup> (Emphasis added) Yet, as far as morality is concerned, why is the choice not to live not as valid as any other? Why is it not arbitrary or optional whether a man accepts his nature as a living being or not? Why cannot the rejection of life as one's goal claim the sanction of reason? Is Branden claiming somehow that one ought to choose to live? What does Branden mean by "sanction of reason," by "valid"?

Branden notes that Rand, by identifying the context in which values arise existentially, demonstrates how an "ought" can be derived from an "is". Branden explains that for a person

not to hold man's life as one's standard for moral judgment is to be guilty of a *logical contradiction*. It is only to a living entity that things can be good or evil, life is the basic value that makes all other values possible; the value of life is not justified by a value beyond itself; to demand such justification — to ask: Why *should* man choose to live? — is to have dropped the meaning, context, and source of one's concepts. 'Should' is a concept that can have no intelligible meaning, if divorced from the concept and life.<sup>6</sup>

The argument seems to be that if one tries to value something apart from accepting the basic value of life, which for a human being is man's survival qua man, one is guilty of an inconsistency. If life is the basic value which makes all other values possible, including even one's valuing not to live, then a person who prefers not to live is implicitly accepting the value of life. Thus, the person who chooses not to live cannot claim the sanction of reason. He is involved in a contradiction,<sup>7</sup> and since his activity of choosing not to

live involves a contradiction, logically his choice is not "valid".

While we may have questions about whether life is the basic value that makes all other values possible and indeed about what this claim actually amounts to when it comes to human beings, let us grant it, for that is not the issue here. Rather, the issue concerns the primacy of choice in Rand's ethics. If all judgments regarding what a person ought or ought not to do are only possible if that person first chooses to live, and if we are dealing with someone who chooses not to live, then what force does the logical evaluation of his choice as involving an inconsistency have? In other words, what difference is being told "You are guilty of a contradiction" supposed to make to this person *if* the possibility of "oughts" or "shoulds" for him is dependent on his first choosing to live. If he actually can choose not to live, and if no obligation can exist without the choice to live, it would seem that being told that he is inconsistent would not make any difference to his conduct. What would be the point of these logical evaluations if this person is not subject to moral ones also? Is not the effectiveness of the logical evaluation of inconsistency<sup>8</sup> in getting a person to change his beliefs or conduct dependent on the claim that he *ought* not commit contradictions? To the person who chooses not to live, and thus has no obligations, the logical evaluations — "inconsistent" and "invalid" — do not obligate him to change his choice. He has neither reason nor motivation.

From the perspective of morality, it seems that, despite Branden's claims, the choice to live is ultimately optional or arbitrary. There is no reason why one should choose to live or choose not to live. And if this is true, then Rand's derivation of an "ought" from an "is" seems of limited value: if I choose to live, then I ought to do such and such, but since there can be no obligation without this choice, there is nothing, either logically or morally, which obligates me to choose to live and thus no reason to be moral. Possibly, there was something to Hazel E. Barnes including a chapter on "Objectivist Ethics" in her book, *An Existentialist Ethics*.<sup>9</sup> Morality seems to be based on an irrational or arbitrary commitment — the very thing Rand vehemently rejects.

Yet it might be replied that this conclusion is too quickly made. If it is true that logically one cannot value anything without valuing that which makes such valuation possible, and if life is the very thing which makes valuation possible, then the value "life" is implicit in any choice or valuation a person makes, and thus in making *any* choice, one chooses to live. Even the person who chooses not to live values, chooses life. Thus, it may be said that virtually everyone alive chooses to live. Only those who are involved in literally no choices would be outside the moral arena. But this, of course, is not unusual. Morality is generally understood as only applying to chosen actions. Thus, though Rand's "oughts" are only hypothetical imperatives, they apply to virtually everyone. Since the choice to live is so implicit or deep, it is not as easy to opt out of ethics as it first appeared.

This reply is not, however, sufficient. It only pushes the issue back another step, because it should now be asked: What does it mean to say that the value life is *implicit* in any choice a person makes? The point here is that "implicit" has to refer to more than a logical condition for something being a value. The argumentative punch of the claim that the value life is "implicit" in any choice has to be able to produce more than a charge of inconsistency against the person

who fails to value that which makes any valuation possible. As already said, if obligations are possible only on the condition of the choice to live, it is not at all clear how being guilty of a contradiction will make any difference to the belief or conduct of one who chooses not to live. Further, just what does it mean to say that in making any choice, a person chooses to live? If the person who chooses not to live insists that he is not choosing life, how are we to say that his actions are for the sake of more than he claims for them? We might say that logically this person's choice has certain presuppositions and these must be part of his choice, but again how does that show that he ought to regard his action as being for the sake of something more? The ends of a person's action seem to be entirely determined by what he says they are for, so the existentialist "flavor" of Rand's theory of obligation remains.

## Rand's Theory of Value

I believe that something has gone wrong here, and I believe it is the assumption that there can be no obligation without the choice to live. Further, I believe that what Rand is claiming in "Causality Versus Duty" is subject to a different interpretation than what has so far been presented, and I will get to that eventually. Yet, I think the best way to proceed now is to come at the question of what grounds obligation from another direction. So, let us consider these questions: Is life a value because we choose it, or do we choose life because it is a value? Is choice the cause of life being a value, or is life the value that is ultimately the cause of choice? The basis for answers to these questions appears to be found in the following well-known statement by Rand:

An *ultimate* value is that final goal or end to which all lesser goals are the means — and it sets the standard by which all lesser goals are evaluated. An organism's life is its *standard of value*: that which furthers its life is the *good*, that which threatens it is the *evil*.

Without an ultimate goal or end, there can be no lesser goals or means: a series of means going off into an infinite progression toward a nonexistent end is a metaphysical and epistemological impossibility. It is only an ultimate goal, an *end in itself*, that makes the existence of values possible. Metaphysically, *life* is the only phenomenon that is an end in itself: a value gained and kept by a constant process of action. Epistemologically, the concept of "value" is genetically dependent upon and derived from the antecedent concept of "life". To speak of "value" as apart from "life" is worse than a contradiction in terms. "It is only the concept of 'Life' that makes the concept of 'Value' possible."

In answer to those philosophers who claim that no relation can be established between ultimate ends or values and the facts of reality, let me stress that the fact that living entities exist and function necessitates the existence of values and of an ultimate value which for any given living entity is its own life. Thus the validation of value judgments is to be achieved by reference to the facts of reality. The fact that a living entity is, determines what it ought to do. So much for the relation between "is" and "ought."<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, Rand is claiming that in reality there is something which is by its very nature an end in itself, an ultimate value,

and this is life. It is the only phenomenon which is an end in itself or ultimate value. Life is *the* end or value which makes all other ends or values possible. It is the ultimate goal of a living thing's actions. Further, since "life" does not exist in the abstract, this means that for any living entity, its life is the ultimate end or value for its actions. Nowhere in this passage does Rand claim that the existence of life as the ultimate end, goal, or value is dependent on choice. Life is not a value because we choose it, but rather because of what it is — *metaphysically, life is ... an end in itself: a value gained and kept by a constant process of action.*

This claim requires, of course, much explanation, and this brief paper is not the place for it. However, it is important for our purposes to consider if this claim conflicts with Branden's observation that "in no sense does Ayn Rand regard any particular value as a metaphysical given, as pre-existing in man or in the universe."<sup>11</sup> The crucial words in Branden's observation are, of course, "particular value". Life is the ultimate end or value, but this does not require that life be a particular end or value. Rather, it is an inclusive end or value. Life is an activity which is constituted by actions that are both productive of and expressive of it. Life is not some dominant end, separate and apart from the activities that make it up. Nor is life, to use a term many readers of Rand are familiar with, an "intrinsic" value. It is something that is attained by the actions of a living thing, but life is not some *thing* which exists apart from this action. Branden's observation, then, does not seem to conflict with the claim that metaphysically, life is an end in itself.

As is well known, Rand holds that it is the specific nature or identity of a living being which determines which ends or values are proper for it. That which is required for man's survival *qua man* is the standard of value for a human being. It is this standard which determines what is good or bad for a human being.

That which his survival requires is set by his nature and is not open to his choice. What *is* open to his choice is only whether he will discover it or not, whether he will choose right goals and *values* or not.<sup>12</sup>

What the proper values or ends for a human being are is not open to choice according to Rand. Choice itself does not determine the end and standard by which choices are judged. Rather, choices are judged in terms of the end and standard of man's life.

Choice is not the cause of the ultimate value of life, but life as the ultimate end is the cause — in the sense of creating the need for — the activity that is choice. It is by choosing, which for Rand ultimately refers to attaining and maintaining a conceptual focus regarding the world, that the life which is proper to a man is attained.

Nothing is given to man on earth except a potential and the material on which to actualize it. The potential is a superlative machine: his consciousness; but it is a machine without a sparkplug, the self-starter and the driver; *he* has to discover how to use it and he has to keep it in constant action ... Everything he needs or desires has to be learned, discovered and produced by him — by his own choice, by his own mind.<sup>13</sup>

A human consciousness is a potentiality that can only be actualized through an individual's own choice, and though it is through choice that human life and values come to actually

exist, choice nonetheless has a function or end in terms of which it can be judged. Thus, when Rand states that man has to be man by choice and that he has to hold his life as a value by choice,<sup>14</sup> she is speaking of choice — the exercise of mind — as necessary to actualize a potential. She is not saying that choice creates the potential or sets its own end.

Choice is crucial in attaining the ultimate value or end of a man's life qua man, but choice is not necessary for man's life to *be* the end or goal of human life. Choice does not determine the ultimate end of choice. This is the result of man's nature as a *living* being. The goal and standard of human life is man's survival qua man. This is, to put it plainly and controversially, man's natural end. This is the Aristotelian "flavor" of Rand's ethics.

Yet, if this is so, then we need to reexamine the situation we faced earlier — namely, is it true that no moral evaluation can be made of the choice not to live? The answer now is "no". Since the goal and standard of human choice is man's life, moral evaluation of this choice, and any choice, is possible. We can even say that a person ought to choose to live.<sup>15</sup> There is no need of some value beyond life for this evaluation to be made. Rather, living as a human being — man's life — is the goal and standard set by our nature. If we return to the argument advanced by Branden against the person who chooses not to live, it can now be seen that being guilty of a contradiction does have force for this person. Even though this person chooses not to live, his activity of choosing has an end regardless of whether he intends it or not. Man's life is the ultimate end or goal of human action. This means that for this person living his life according to the principles his nature requires, e.g., not committing contradictions, is good for him. There is nothing else in terms of which a reason can be given for why something ought to be done. The obligation not to commit contradictions comes from a consideration of what is good for this person. It is not from his choice or from a consideration of the "demands" of logic.

## Reconsidering "Causality Versus Duty"

Branden speaks of the *choice* not to live. I do also, but in the passage quoted from "Causality Versus Duty" Rand speaks of someone either choosing to live or *not* choosing to live. Strictly speaking, not choosing is not a choice. This is an important difference. *Not* choosing involves no course of action being taken. There is nothing to evaluate. Choosing not to X, even not to choose, is capable of evaluation. A course of action has been taken. It is not clear that Rand means what she literally says — that is, that she means "*not* choosing to live" as opposed to "*choosing* not to live". If she does, then there would be no reason to specify the choice in terms of life, for it would be choosing as opposed to not choosing that would make the principles of a rational ethics applicable, not the object of this choice. Yet, given (1) the fundamental value that life represents, (2) Rand's understanding of choice as the exercise of one's conceptual capacity, and (3) Rand's claim that it is only through the exercise of one's conceptual capacity that a person can live as a human being, it might be that she sees no difference between choosing and choosing to live. I am not sure what she means.

It should also be noted that the assumption which created the existentialist "flavor" of Rand's theory of obligation is the

claim that judgments about what someone ought or ought not to do are only possible if a person chooses to live. In other words, choosing to live is a necessary condition for the existence of obligation. Let us call this claim "CNO". Is this claim, CNO, actually being made in the passages quoted? Rand states that (A) if one chooses to live, then a rational ethics will tell one what principles of action to follow (*viz.*, a rational ethics will be one's standard of moral evaluation). Further, she states that (B) if one does not choose to live, then nature will take its course. She does not, however, state that (C) if one does *not* choose to live, then a rational ethics will *not* tell one the principles of action to follow. Neither does she say that (D) if one chooses not to live, then a rational ethics will *not* tell one the principles of action to follow. Further, (C) is not implied by either (A) or (B) or even (A) and (B). The same is true for (D). Yet in order for CNO to be made, Rand has to be claiming either (C) or (D). From what I can tell, she claims neither. Thus, maybe her theory of obligation is consistent with what seems to be the central feature of her theory of value — that is, the belief that man's life is the goal and standard for human choice.

Finally, it must be remembered that Rand is attacking Kant's duty ethics in this essay, and she is emphasising how morality has to be related to the needs, interests, and goals of an individual. I do not think, however, she needs to be interpreted as advocating the idea that we can only know that we should practice the virtues required by a rational ethics after considering the consequences of a specific action. Nor am I sure that her moral principles, specifically the virtues which man's survival qua man require, are merely rules that a consideration of consequences have dictated. In other words, I am skeptical if consequentialism best captures Rand's theory of obligation. It seems to me that virtue and value are too intimately related in Rand for her view of obligation to be seen as a consequentialism, but this must be an issue for another day.

## NOTES

1. Ayn Rand, "This Is John Galt Speaking?", in *For The New Intellectual*, New American Library, New York, 1961, p. 128.
2. Ayn Rand, "Causality Versus Duty", *The Objectivist*, July 1970, p. 4.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
5. Nathaniel Branden, "The Moral Revolution in 'Atlas Shrugged'", in Nathaniel and Barbara Branden, *Who Is Ayn Rand?*, Paperback Library, New York, 1964, p. 27.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 26-27
7. Despite appearances, this is not primarily an argument against suicide. See note 15. Further, I will leave for some other occasion a discussion of whether this inconsistency is of a logical or a performative nature.
8. A contradictory belief is something which must be false, but it is not literally meaningless.
9. Hazel E. Barnes, "Egoistic Humanism: Ayn Rand's Humanism", in *An Existentialist Ethics*, hardback, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1967, and paperback, Vintage Books, New York, 1971.
10. Ayn Rand "The Objectivist Ethics", in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism*, New American Library/Signet Books, New York, 1964, p. 17.
11. Branden, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
12. Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics", *op. cit.*, p. 22.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
15. Of course, there can be times in which choosing to die is better, because there might be no chance to live a life proper to a human being. In such a situation, choosing to die would, as odd as it might seem, actually be acting in accordance with the ultimate value of life and would be morally appropriate.