

THE PATCH NEEDED FOR AYN RAND'S "THE OBJECTIVIST ETHICS"



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INTRODUCTION

I have restudied Ayn Rand's key essay "The Objectivist Ethics" very closely, but I find a hole in her argument, a gap in her reasoning. She passes from the indisputable fact that dead men make no choices to an entire system of egoist ethics. In what follows, I am going to outline her argument. I shall be arguing that she moves, from survival as the supreme aim, to happiness. This move requires a patch to cover the hole in her argument, and that patch I denominate the Objectivist psychology, which is at bottom a theory of virtue. But all this is so far mostly implicit. If there are other writings of hers that can provide a fully satisfying patch to cover the hole, or if any readers can provide the patch on their own, I certainly want to hear it. (All page references herein refer to "The Objectivist Ethics", in Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism*, New American Library, New York, 1964.)

SOME CONCEPTS

Morality (here equated with ethics) is "a code of values to guide man's choices and actions — the choices and actions that determine the purpose and the course of his life" (p. 13, the first page of the essay, which ends on p. 35).

So, she defines a word, "morality", in terms of other words, "code", "value", "guide", "choice", "action", "determine", "purpose", "course", and "life". Most of the words are not likely to give any trouble, at least not here and at least not now. We can argue how comprehensive this code should be, where the principles leave off, and where one just goes ahead and makes cost-benefit estimates or just acts on one's tastes. We

can also argue over the various meanings of "determine". But for now, only "value" and "purpose" are apt to give problems. I am not trying to maximize quibbling, rather to isolate a hole in an argument interpreted as best as I can.

Value "is that which one acts to gain and/or keep" (p. 15). This definition has been quoted many times by Ayn Rand's fans and/or critics. She does not specify the scope of values or which levels they cover: first level desires like tastes, second level desires that are more considered and deal with longer-range achievements, and what may be top-level values having to do with the overarching purpose of one's life. Again, "purpose" is a word that will be causing trouble. In any case, "value" here is simply a matter of what one does in fact act "to gain and/or keep".

LIFE OR DEATH

She goes on: "The concept 'value' is not a primary; it presupposes an answer to the question: *of value to whom and for what?* It presupposes an entity capable of acting to achieve a goal in the face of an alternative. Where no alternative exists, no goals and values are possible" (p. 15). Well, yes, but the definition seems clear enough: the value is that which *one acts* to gain and/or keep. There is an actor and the value is what that actor acts to gain and/or keep. What she means by a "primary concept" is not clear. But I don't want to quibble; nor will I quibble that a new concept, "goal", has been introduced.

Then she, speaking through John Galt, tells us that "there is only one fundamental alternative in the universe: existence or nonexistence — and it pertains to a single class of entities: to living organisms. The existence of inanimate matter is unconditional, the existence of life is not: it depends on a specific course of action. Matter is indestructible, it changes its forms, but it cannot cease to exist. It is only a living organism that faces a constant alternative: the issue of life or death. Life is a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action ..." (p. 15). Diamonds, of course, are entities and can cease to exist by being heated to a certain temperature, even though the elemental carbon continues, but diamonds cannot act. So perhaps she means values are to be attributed only to entities that can act. On the next page, however, she speaks of her famous hypothetical "indestructible robot" (p. 16), which (she says) can have no values (cannot act to gain and/or keep anything), since it does not face the "one fundamental alternative in the universe: existence or nonexistence". The term "fundamental" has been introduced without definition, so I cannot be certain whether she is mistaken about there being "only one fundamental alternative in the universe". My own view is that indestructible robots violate the laws of physics, but they are at least logical possibilities and they could indeed have values.



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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

LIFE OR REPRODUCTION

I make these points only because her next paragraph introduces something that is contrary to what we know about biology: “On the *physical* level, the functions of all living organisms ... are actions generated by the organism itself and directed toward a single goal: the maintenance of the organism’s life” (p. 16). We know from biology (Miss Rand was not up to date) that *reproduction* is every bit as much the goal of organisms, if not more so, as the maintenance of life. True enough, the organism must remain alive long enough to get the sperm or eggs out (sometimes it dies before birth of its offspring is actually achieved), but the goal of continuing to live can be, and often is, overridden by the goal of reproducing. Self = two children = four grandchildren = ... is the governing equation, since the self is going to die anyway. Organisms, often, will go on living after the birth of their children, but the end is to serve getting one’s offspring to the point of *their* reproduction, not to keep oneself alive. Once Mom and Pop have outlived their usefulness, they die; indeed, they are genetically programmed to die, or so at least claim most biologists. So the “fundamental alternative” is not life but reproduction.

Now this view of biology, known as the “selfish gene” view, is not without its critics. The older view, which was Darwin’s, was that the individual organism is the fundamental and only unit of selection. Now the consensus view is that individual genes are the sole units. But then there are those claiming that units larger than the individual, even entire species and higher taxa, can also be units of evolution. This gives rise to the difficulties of what is called group selection: there must be a genetic disposition to what biologists call “altruism”, meaning a willingness to sacrifice one’s life for the good of some group larger than the carrier’s of one’s own genes. But this means that those organisms with such a disposition will be bred out of the population. Group selection can arise in very limited circumstances, nevertheless, but such circumstances are quite rare, or so goes the consensus opinion. I mention all this, since the question of units of selection has never been satisfactorily conceptualized. I should also state that the biological world is rife with cases of apparent “altruism”, and accounting for them is regarded by many biologists, including E. O. Wilson, as the central issue of sociobiology. A great deal of apparent “altruism” can indeed be explained away: how big the residual of unexplained instances is, I do not know. I have not browsed sci.bio.evolution enough to check on any debates there. Objectivism will certainly have to be developed much further, or be replaced with a scientific metaphysics of the sort Mario Bunge has developed, or merged with it, to tackle this extremely important and difficult issue.

A TRUISM

Ayn Rand continues:

An *ultimate* [not *fundamental*, but this seems to be no big change] value is the 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* ... the fact that living entities exist and function necessitates the existence of values [recall: that which one acts to gain and/or keep] 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 issue of the relation between “*is*” and “*ought*” (p. 17).

Forget for now the problems biologists have with life, not reproduction, being the *fundamental* (or *ultimate*) value. What she is saying, and *all* that she is saying, is that in order for an organism to act to gain and/or keep anything at all, it must stay alive, that *enough* of its actions must be such as to succeed at keeping alive. In other words, though this is a conclusion she did not draw, the organism might act to gain and/or keep any number of things,¹ but it has to value staying alive and more-over its actions must in fact succeed in its staying alive.

This seems like an utterly harmless truism. Living things are *constrained* in the sorts of action they can undertake, but how constrained is the question. An ethics, at all worthy of the name, can get out of this seemingly harmless truism *only* if the constraints are really vigorous. The task for ethics is to formulate just what these constraints are. Ayn Rand does not go into the full details of what living things must do to get an adequate amount of food, but she does state that plants do so automatically.² Animals (the higher ones, at any rate) also need consciousness, of at least the sensational variety, to go hunt for their food, and animals higher yet need to operate on the perceptual level. But men have to operate on the *conceptual* level as well, at least sometimes and perhaps a great deal of the time, if they are to stay alive. Moreover, making concepts is voluntary (p. 20). She never explains why, since she was largely uninterested in biology, but she could have read a statement of V. C. Wynne-Edwards:

Compliance with the social code can be made obligatory and automatic, and it probably is so in almost all animals that possess social homeostatic systems at all. In at least some of the mammals, on the contrary, the individual has been released from this rigid compulsion, probably because a certain amount of intelligent individual enterprise has proved advantageous to the group.³

Now if Ayn Rand can quote John Galt, I can quote me:

Such an explanation invokes group selection and is bound to be controversial. An alternative explanation might be that a) thinking requires work (uses up costly brain chemicals) and b) free-will circuitry allows the animal (or maybe just certain humans) to choose both whether to think and what to think about. Far less brain hardware, in other words, may be required by taking the free will route.⁴

But now what do we have? Only that, to survive, each individual man must engage in a certain amount of conceptualizing. There is much more to be done before we arrive at the Objectivist ethics as we know it. Ayn Rand goes on in the next few pages to discuss what concepts are (“mental integrations of two or more perceptual concretes” — p. 20), what reason is (“the faculty that perceives, identifies and integrates the material provided by the senses” — p. 20), and what thinking is (the process of reasoning) and requires (“a state of full, focused awareness” — p. 20). She redefines consciousness “in the sense of the word applicable to man” to mean the (voluntary) focusing of his mind. She adds, “the choice ‘to be conscious or not’ is the choice of life or death” (p. 21).

THE HOLE IN THE ARGUMENT

What has happened is that there is an elision between *some* focusing as being necessary to any man’s survival and “a state of full, focused awareness”. *It is this elision that constitutes the major hole in the Objectivist ethics and needs to be patched up*. She adds that “a process of thought ... is not infallible” (peculiar grammar here) and that man “has to discover how to tell what is true or false and how to correct his own errors; he has to discover how to validate his concepts, his conclusions, his knowledge; he has to discover the rules of thought, *the laws*

of logic, to direct his thinking” (pp. 20-21). How man survived the hundreds of thousands of years before he did all these things is not addressed. Again, there is an elision between the minimum necessary and virtuous aspirations.

Here is a potential patch:

If some men do not choose to think [at what depth?], but survive by imitating and repeating, like trained animals, the routine of sounds and motions they learned from others, it still remains true that their survival is made possible only by those who did choose to think and discover the motions they are repeating. [This is true of nearly all the thinkers, too.] The survival of such mental parasites depends on blind chance; their unfocused minds are unable to know *whom* to imitate, *whose* motions it is safe to follow. *They* are the men who march into the abyss, trailing after any destroyer who promises them to assume the responsibility of being conscious (p. 23).

Or, you'd better think for yourself, lest you be at the mercy of others. But Ayn Rand, as in many other cases, dichotomizes a continuum: you'd better think and focus to the hilt, or you're a mental parasite and your survival depends on blind chance. She adds presently,

The men who attempt to survive, not by means of reason, but by means of force, are attempting to survive by the method of animals, ... by rejecting reason and counting on productive men to serve as their prey. Such looters may achieve their goals for the range of a moment at the price of destruction: the destruction of their victims and their own. As evidence, I offer you any criminal or any dictatorship (pp. 23-24).

(Note that the last sentence here and the last sentence of the previous paragraph leave the individual and discuss social consequences.)

Same problem. The hole in her argument, the gap in her reasoning, is still there: this “moment” may very well last an entire lifetime, and it is only a *claim* that if

man is to succeed at the task of survival, if his actions are not to be aimed at his own destruction, man has to choose his course, his goals, his values in the context and terms of a lifetime (p. 24).

And she switches from survival to “man’s survival *qua* man”, as opposed to “the momentary physical survival of a mindless brute, waiting for another brute to crush his skull” (p. 24). She adds that a man

can turn himself into [such] a subhuman creature and he *can* turn his life into a brief span of agony ... But he cannot succeed, as a subhuman, in achieving anything but the subhuman — as the ugly horror of the antirational periods of mankind’s history can demonstrate (pp. 24-25).

By again dragging in social consequences of the actions of individuals, she has conflated the individual man with collectivities of them. This, from a prophet of egoism!

The hole is still there, but there are ten more pages to go in this essay, as well as in other essays by her and by others like Nathaniel Branden and Leonard Peikoff. And the readers here might supply the patch with their own arguments and evidence. The patch so far is the claim that hoping that others will take up the slack if you default on your thinking is risky. She presents no evidence that the risk is all that great. Her policy is what economists would call extreme “risk aversion”: take no chances that others will pick up the slack. But she does not justify this policy.

THE OBJECTIVIST VIRTUES

But there is another way to cover the hole. The patch in the Objectivist ethics is quite implicit in the rest of the essay, which mingles more stuff about the requirements of survival with talk about virtue and happiness. Exercising my brain may not have all that much effect on my life span, after a certain minimal point, but doing so may nevertheless make me better off in some sense. Mental exercise is on all fours with physical exercise: it is self-recommending and you may need specific advice, which you may or may not carry out. So let Ayn Rand stop being our moral *physicist* and become our moral *physician*. The patch between the two I denominate the *Objectivist psychology*.

Value is that which one acts to gain and/or keep — *virtue* is the act by which one gains and/or keeps it. The three cardinal values of the Objectivist ethics — the three values which, together, are the means to and the realization of one’s ultimate value, one’s own life — are: Reason, Purpose, Self-Esteem, with their three corresponding virtues: Rationality, Productiveness, Pride.

Productive work is the central *purpose* [not virtue] of a rational man’s life, the central value [not life itself anymore] that integrates and determines the hierarchy of all his other values. Reason is the source, the precondition of his productive work — pride is the result.

Rationality is man’s basic virtue, the source of all his other virtues ... [and it means] ... the recognition and acceptance of reason as one’s only source of knowledge, one’s only judge of values and one’s only guide to action.⁵ It means one’s total commitment to a state of full, conscious awareness, to the maintenance of a full mental focus in all issues, in all choices, in all of one’s waking hours ... (p. 25).

AYN RAND THE MORAL PHYSICIAN

This is Ayn Rand the moral *physician*, not the moral *physicist*, talking.⁶ It ought to be the job of physicians get their patients actively involved with their own health, rather than just to manage their diseases, to aspire and not just do the minimum.⁷ Ayn Rand fits this to a T, and that, I submit, is what her philosophy and her ethics most especially is all about. Her novels are aspirational. She said she was a novelist first. We ought to take her seriously on this.

Now watch what happens: Rationality comprises several sub-virtues, among them independence, integrity, honesty, and justice. Regards the latter, “one must never seek or grant the unearned or undeserved, neither in matter nor in spirit” (p. 26). Fine, but two new concepts, unearned and undeserved, have appeared out of nowhere in an essay that purports to give a foundation for ethics. You and I have a pre-philosophical understanding of what these two words mean. We have gone to Ayn Rand the moral *physician* for advice on how to live, not Ayn Rand the moral *physicist* for elucidation of ideas.⁸

And what does this moral physician promise us? Happiness.

The basic *social* principle of the Objectivist ethics is that just as life is an end in itself, so every living human being is an end in himself, not the means to the ends or the welfare of others — and, therefore, that man must live for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself. To live for his own sake means that *the achievement of his own happiness is man’s highest moral purpose* (p. 27).

The *physicist* said life was the fundamental purpose; the *physician* holds out happiness. Here’s her justification for the switch:

In psychological terms, the issue of man's survival does not confront his consciousness as an issue of 'life or death,' but as an issue of 'happiness or suffering.' Happiness is the successful state of life, suffering is the warning signal of failure, or death. Just as the pleasure-pain mechanism of man's body is an automatic indicator of his body's welfare or injury, a barometer of its basic alternative — so the emotional mechanism of man's consciousness is geared to perform the same function, as a barometer that registers the same alternative by means of two basic emotions: joy or suffering (p. 25).⁹

THE COGNITIVE BASIS OF EMOTIONS

What Ayn Rand does claim is that the emotions, in order to pay off in the coin of happiness, must be programmed correctly. And that calls for reason, since man is born without innate ideas.¹⁰ Full happiness cannot be obtained unless one thinks to the hilt and thereby ensures that one's values are rational.

If he chooses irrational values, he switches his emotional mechanism from the role of his guardian to the role of his destroyer. The irrational is the impossible; it is that which contradicts the facts of reality; facts cannot be altered by a wish, but they *can* destroy the wisher. If a man desires and pursue contradictions — if he wants to have his cake and eat it, too — he disintegrates his consciousness; he turns his inner life into a civil war of blind forces engaged in dark, incoherent, pointless, meaningless conflicts (which, incidentally, is the state of most people today) (p. 28).

(What were things like in Russia, then, I ask?)

Something very wrong has happened. An obsessive desire (as opposed to some idle daydreaming) for something one is aware is impossible will surely cause emotional problems. But we all pursue goals that turn out not to be feasible, that contradict "the facts of reality". Ayn Rand almost seems to be imagining a mind¹¹ that has direct access to the truth and will punish emotionally those who do things contrary to this truth. What an incredible machine! Of course, she would deny any such thing; in this very essay, she stated that men are fallible. But, nevertheless, that's what she said. I will leave it to others to specify what she should have said, to figure out what she meant by irrational values. We will still need to know how to choose rational values among the myriad available ones, the only limitation being that they support life.

The message from Ayn Rand, the moral *physician*, however, is clear enough: be ambitious; set up long term goals that are plausible; get to work; be productive; do things yourself; don't mooch; don't loot; don't swindle. Take pride in your achievements. Above all, be independent.

Sounds like good advice to me, but independence comes to me naturally. I think it's in my genes. It gets me into trouble, endlessly, but I keep my self-respect and my sanity. I never did care for all those altruists who thought other people came before me. Indeed, when I first read *Atlas Shrugged* in 1964, for the first few hundred pages, I thought the book was a modernist satire on these people. But that her advice is for everyone, I do not know. Yes, a lot of people would be happier if they were more daring and independent. That they should all be as independent as Ayn Rand is just a claim of one moral physician and one great novelist.

INTERPERSONAL ETHICS

The rest of the essay moves away from the individual's code for his own life to what most people regard as morality, namely rules for dealing with other people. There is more dichotomiz-

ing, which is superb exhortation but bad metaphysics. There is her famous metaphysical claim that

the *rational* interests of men do not clash — there is no conflict of interests among men who do not desire the unearned [that word again!], who do not make sacrifices nor accept them, who deal with one another as traders, giving value for value (p. 31).

She concludes her essay with political philosophy. The word "right" appears out of nowhere four lines from the bottom on page 32, but then she said she had presented the political theory of Objectivism "in full detail in *Atlas Shrugged*" (p. 33).

I don't think she did; in fact, I know she didn't. If there is what the metaphysicians among philosophers call "preestablished harmony" among the interests of rational men, this needs to be demonstrated. *Atlas Shrugged* did not do the job, nor did a later essay, "The 'Conflicts' of Men's Interests".

Whatever the holes, Ayn Rand, to her great credit, focused on what is generally called not "ethical egoism" but "metaethical egoism", or the doctrine that any system of morals must be justified to the individual. The problem "Why be moral?" goes back at least to Socrates, who gave the same answer Ayn Rand did, namely that it's good for your character. Otherwise, a system of morality is something anyone can draw up however he chooses and it will remain an idle set of rules.

Ayn Rand knew better. She tried to ground her system on the necessity of keeping alive. Alas, not very much can be deduced from that. But that was Ayn Rand the moral physicist. Ayn Rand the moral physician had a system that was far, far more comprehensive. But it rests upon an implicit Objectivist psychology. Until that psychology is presented, elucidated, and defended (which will involve more neurology, evolutionary biology, and more just plain empirical drudgery than she ever realized), the Objectivist ethics has holes. They need to be patched. And in the attempts to make the patches, the ethics may be get altered quite a bit, but it may also be able to answer many questions it now cannot.

NOTES

1. What constitutes "things" is unspecified. Rand just says "that which".
2. So do certain lowly animals like sponges, but I won't quibble.
3. V. C. Wynne-Edwards, "Intergroup Selection in the Evolution of Social Systems", *Nature* 200: 623-26, 1963. This was available before the paperback edition of *The Virtue of Selfishness*, though no one should blame Ayn Rand for not knowing the article.
4. Frank Forman, *The Metaphysics of Liberty*, Kluwer Academic, Dordrech, Holland, 1989, p. 155.
5. Can we trust others very much at all? Should be all become our own physicians, if life is the standard of value?
6. Or should it be moral meta-physicist, with a thesis about life being the standard of value? It was Nathaniel Branden who went on to being a moral *coach*, with his various Institutes. Anyhow, the term meta-physicist should be reserved for Mario Bunge.
7. Here I go using the O-word ("ought"), but never mind.
8. There's similar stuff about the virtues of productiveness and pride that follows in this part of "The Objectivist Ethics", which I do not need to cite.
9. As is the case with thought being volitional, she does not recognize the importance of neurological or evolutionary evidence to verify this harmonious fit. Humans have emotions because the animals we evolved from do, but why animals should burden their brains with an emotional circuit instead of just straightaway doing the right thing as far as survival and reproduction go is a good question, since adding extra circuits has a cost in calories.
10. She is wrong here. Men are afraid of snakes even in countries like Madagascar where there are no poisonous snakes. This fear is an emotional reaction by the mind and therefore, on her own theory of the cognition-emotion link, a piece of innate knowledge about snakes and their dangers.
11. She rarely uses the word "brain" and almost always says "rational being" instead of "rational animal". Methinks her thought is towards the end of the spiritual pole on the spiritual-materialist continuum, even while she officially rejects the mind-body dichotomy.