

THE CONGRUITY AMONG AYN RAND'S METAPHYSICS, EPISTEMOLOGY, VALUE THEORY, AND ETHICS

Professor Edward W. Younkens



Ed Younkens

Edward W. Younkens PhD is the author of *Capitalism and Commerce: Conceptual Foundations of Free Enterprise* (Lexington Books, 2002) and a professor of accountancy at Wheeling Jesuit University in West Virginia. This essay first appeared in the August 15, 2004 (No. 145) issue of *Le Québécois Libre*, www.quebecoislibre.org.

Philosophical Notes No. 74
ISBN 1 85637 702 4
ISSN 0267-7091

© 2004: Libertarian Alliance & Edward Younkens

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, its Advisory Council, or its subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame
Deputy Director: Brian Micklethwait
Director of Communications: Dr Sean Gabb
Public Affairs Director: Dr Tim Evans
Editorial & Membership Director: Nigel Meek

**Libertarian
Alliance**

For Life, Liberty, and Property

Suite 35
2 Lansdowne Row
Mayfair
London
W1J 6HL

Telephone: 020 7821 5502
Email: admin@libertarian.co.uk
Website: www.libertarian.co.uk

THE CONGRUITY AMONG AYN RAND'S METAPHYSICS, EPISTEMOLOGY, VALUE THEORY, AND ETHICS

Professor Edward W. Younkins

Introduction

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of the universe as a totality. Epistemology is concerned with the relationship between a man's mind (i.e., his consciousness) and reality (i.e., the nature of the universe) and with the operation of reason. In other words, epistemology investigates the fundamental nature of knowledge including its sources and validation. One's theory of knowledge necessarily includes a theory of concepts and one's theory of concepts determines one's theory or concept of value (and ethics). The key to understanding ethics is in the concept of value and thus ultimately is located in epistemology and metaphysics. The purpose of this essay is to delineate the inextricable and well-argued linkages between the various components of Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism. Rand's philosophy is a systematic and integrated unity with every part depending upon every other part. The majority of this paper deals with the related areas of value theory and ethics because those are the fields in which Rand's ideas all cash in and can be seen to tie together.

Metaphysics

Metaphysics is the first philosophical branch of knowledge. At the metaphysical level, Rand's Objectivism begins with axioms—fundamental truths or irreducible primaries that are self-evident by means of direct perception, the basis for all further knowledge, and undeniable without self-contradiction. Axioms cannot be reduced to other facts or broken down into component parts. They require no proofs or explanations. Objectivism's three basic philosophical axioms are existence, consciousness, and identity—presuppositions of every concept and every statement.

Existence exists and encompasses everything including all states of consciousness. The world exists independently of the mind and is there to be discovered by the mind. In order to be conscious, we must be conscious of something. There can be no consciousness if nothing exists. Consciousness, the faculty of perceiving that which exists, is the ability to discover, rather than to create, objects. Consciousness, a relational concept, presupposes the existence of something external to consciousness, something to be aware of. Initially, we become aware of something outside of our consciousness and then we become aware of our consciousness by contemplating on the process through which we became aware.

Rand explains that the metaphysically given (i.e., any fact inherent in existence apart from the human action) is absolute and simply is. The metaphysically given includes scientific laws and events taking place outside of the control of men. The metaphysically given must be accepted and cannot be changed. She explains, however, that man has the ability to adapt nature to meet his requirements. Man can creatively rearrange the combination of nature's elements by enacting the required cause, the one necessitated by the immutable laws of existence. The man-made includes any object, institution, procedure, or rule of conduct created by man. Man-made facts are products of choice and can be evaluated and judged and then accepted or rejected and changed when necessary.

Epistemology

Epistemology deals with the nature and starting point of knowledge, with the nature and correct exercise of reason, with reason's connection to the senses and perception, with the possibility of other sources of knowledge, and with the nature and attainability of certainty. Rand explains

that reason is man's cognitive faculty for organizing perceptual data in conceptual terms through the use of the principles of logic. Knowledge exists when a person approaches the facts of reality through either perceptual observation or conceptualization.

Epistemology exists because man is a limited fallible being who learns in disjointed incremental steps and who therefore requires a proper procedure to acquire the knowledge necessary to act, survive, and flourish. A man does not have innate knowledge or instincts that will automatically and unerringly promote his well-being. He does not inevitably know what will help or hinder his life. He therefore needs to know how to acquire reliable and objective knowledge of reality. A man has to gain such knowledge in order to live. A person can only know from within the context of a human way of knowing. Because human beings are neither omniscient nor infallible, all knowledge is contextual in nature.

Whereas concepts are abstractions (i.e., universals), everything that man apprehends is specific and concrete. Concept-formation is based on the recognition of similarity among the existents being conceptualized. Rand explains that an individual perceptually discriminates and distinguishes specific entities from their background and from one another. A person then groups objects according to their similarities regarding each of them as a unit. He then integrates a grouping of units into a single mental entity called a concept. The ability to perceive entities or units is man's distinctive method of cognition and the gateway to the conceptual level of man's consciousness. According to Rand, a concept is a mental integration of two or more units which are isolated according to one or more characteristics and united by a specific definition. A definition is the condensation of a large body of observations. A concept is kept in mind by referring to it by a perceptual concrete (i.e., a word). A word transfers a concept into a mental entity whenever a definition gives it identity.

The essential characteristics of a concept are epistemological rather than metaphysical. Rand explains that concepts are neither intrinsic abstract entities existing independently of a person's mind nor are they nominal products of a person's consciousness, unrelated to reality. Concepts are epistemologically objective in that they are produced by man's consciousness in accordance with the facts of reality. Concepts are mental integrations of factual data. They are the products of a cognitive method of classification whose processes must be performed by a human being, but whose content is determined by reality. For Rand, essences are epistemological rather than metaphysical.

Rand contends that, although concepts and definitions are in one's mind, they are not arbitrary because they reflect reality, which is objective. Both consciousness in metaphysics and concepts in epistemology are real and part of ordinary existence—the mind is part of reality. She views concepts as open-ended constructs which subsume all information about their referents, including the information not yet discerned. New facts and discoveries expand or extend a person's concepts, but they do not overthrow or invalidate them. Concepts must conform to the facts of reality.

In order to be objective in one's conceptual endeavors, a human being must fully adhere to reality by applying certain methodological rules based on facts and proper for man's form of cognition. For man, a being with rational consciousness, the appropriate method for conforming to objective reality is reason and logic. In order to survive man needs knowledge and reason is his tool of knowledge.

For Rand, the designation, objective, refers to both the functioning of the concept-formation process and to the output of that process when it is properly performed. A man's consciousness can acquire objective knowledge of reality by employing the proper means of reason in accordance with the rules of logic. When a correct cognitive process has been followed it can be said that the output of that process is objective. In turn, when the mind conforms to

mind-independent reality, the theory of conceptual functioning being followed can be termed objective. The term objective thus applies to both method and to content.

Value Theory

According to Rand, all concepts are derived from facts including the concept “value.” All concepts, including the concept of value, are aspects of reality in relationship to individual men. Values are epistemologically objective when they are discovered through objective conceptual processes and are metaphysically objective when their achievement requires conformity to reality.

Rand asks what fact or facts of reality give rise to the concept of value. She reasons that there must be something in perceptual reality that results in the concept value. She argues that it is only from observing other living things (and oneself introspectively) in the pursuit of their own lives that a person can perceive the referents of the term value. For example, people act to attain various material and other goods and determine their choices by reference to various goals, ends, standards, or principles. For Rand, the concept of value depends upon and is derived from the antecedent concept of life. It is life that entails the possibility of something being good or bad for it. The normative aspect of reality arises with the appearance of life.

Ayn Rand defined value as that which one acts to gain and/or keep. A value is an object of action. In this sense we can say that everyone pursues values. This includes any goal-directed behavior. The term, value, thus can refer in a general, neutral, or descriptive sense to what is observable. We see people going after things. Initially, we do not consider whether or not people are properly employing their free will when they pursue their values. As children, we first get the idea of value implicitly from observation and introspection. We then move from an initial descriptive idea of value toward a normative definition of value that includes the notion that a legitimate value serves one’s life. Because reality is the source and standard of ra-

tional values, exposure to reality is the means by which we discover them.

The first generic and descriptive idea of value ties value to reality and is a precondition to an objective and normative perspective on value. The second, narrower way of looking at value adds the words “which furthers one’s life” and the idea of the proper and rational use of a person’s free will. The second definition or Objectivist concept of value is a derivative or inference from the first. The first view of value comes before the knowledge of life as the standard of value. The second view of value gives normative guidance and provides an objective standard to evaluate the use of one’s free will.

Each derivative value exists in a value chain or network in which every value (except for the ultimate value) leads to other values and thus serves both as an end and as a means to other values. A biological ends-means process leads to the ultimate end of the chain which, for a living entity, is its life. For a human individual, the end is survival and happiness and the means are values and virtues that serve that end. Values and virtues are common to, and necessary for, the flourishing of every human person. However, each individual will require them to a different degree. Each man employs his individual judgments to determine the amount of time and effort that should go into the pursuit of various values and virtues. Finding the proper combination and proportion is the task for each person in view of his own talents, potentialities, and circumstances. Values and virtues are necessary for a flourishing life and are objectively discernable, but the exact weighting of them for a specific person is highly individualized.

In order for a chain of values to make sense, there must be some end in itself and ultimate value for which all other values are means. An end in itself is something that we pursue for its own sake rather than pursuing it for the sake of something else. An ultimate value is sought for its own sake and for the sake of which we pursue everything else. An infinite progression or chain of ends and means toward a non-existent end is a metaphysical and epistemological im-

possibility. All must converge on an ultimate value.

There are some values that we pursue both for their own sake and for the sake of something further. Such a value is an end in itself but is not an ultimate value. A value in a chain or hierarchy can at once be a whole and at the same time a part. Life, one's ultimate value, is a process of action that has certain requirements such as productive work, friendship, love, art, and so on. A person's work life, love life, home life, social life, etc., are necessary components of the action of one's life. Each part or ingredient is a means to the end of life while, at the same time, being part of what living is. The process of life subsumes each of its components. It follows that all elements of one's life are both means and ends in themselves but they are not the ultimate value. They are means to the whole of one's life. Every aspect of a person's life is an end in itself that also serves the further end of maintaining the overall process of which it is a component. One's life itself in total is the ultimate and regulatory value of all of a person's other values.

An ultimate value is necessary if a person is to make rational choices. One ultimate value is required for a person to decide how to act. Evaluation necessitates teleological measurement in order to make our potential values commensurable. An ultimate value is needed by which a person can decide to apportion his time and effort and to judge the relevant amounts and proportions of each. Teleological measurement is required in order to establish a graded or ordinal relationship of means to ends. A person must be able to make various values, in the form of means and ends, comparable in order to decide what to do in inevitable cases of conflicts. When different values come into conflict a person refers to a higher value in order to resolve the conflict.

An individual's task is to choose from among numerous values to find the most appropriate for himself. A person must make specific choices with respect to his career, his relationships, and so on. A hierarchy of values helps

people make judgments regarding what to do or to pursue. To do this, an individual must assign a weight, either explicitly or implicitly, to his values. Values need to be weighted or ranked in terms of ordinal numbers. A man requires a prioritized enumeration of values. He must judge the ultimate contribution to the value of his life that exists at the apex of his hierarchy.

A man needs ideas regarding what to pursue in life and ideas with respect to the required means to get what he is seeking. Each person must form values, hierarchize them, and pursue them. A man must expose himself to many aspects of reality in order to discover the things that he loves (i.e., his values). After a man immerses himself in observational reality he must then choose to delimit them to those that most excite and interest him and ignite his soul. He needs to identify the crucial indispensable values to his life and distinguish them from lesser values and non-values. He requires an explicit value hierarchy and should organize his time, effort, and lifestyle around that hierarchy. A person's top values get a disproportionate amount of his attention, the next highest level of values gets the next call, and so on down his hierarchy. By eliminating non-values, filling one's life with things that he loves, and doing those things in the order in which he loves them, a man is on track to accomplish what he wants to do with his finite life. Of course, he should select and pursue values that are rational and metaphysically appropriate for him. Whether or not the means chosen to achieve one's values will be sufficient is determined by objective reality.

A value is an object of goal-directed action. The fact that a person has values implies the existence of his goal-directed actions. Values are distinct from goals despite the fact that in general parlance goals and values are often used interchangeably. One's goals depend upon his values and for a rational person values depend upon the judgment of his mind. A man acts in order to achieve goals that result in his obtaining values. Actions are performed in response to one's values and are undertaken to achieve some goal or end.

To be a value means to be good for someone and for something. Life is one's fundamental value because life is conditional and requires a particular course of action to maintain it. Something can be good or bad only to a living organism, such as a human being, acting to survive. Man's life is the ultimate value and the standard of value for a human being.

A man must make value judgments in order to act. He must choose in the face of an alternative that having or not having the value makes some difference to him. The difference it makes is the alternative he faces. A value exists in a chain of values and must have some ending point. There must be some fundamental difference or fundamental alternative that marks the cessation of one's value chain. There must be some basic alternative that makes no additional difference or, stated differently, a fundamental difference that makes all the difference. It is his life, the process of self-sustaining action, that is the fundamental alternative at the end of a man's value chain. One's life is the alternative that underpins all of his evaluative judgments. It is his ultimate value and the proper end of all the valuer does. One's life is not pursued for the sake of anything beyond itself. It is gained and maintained through a constant process of self-sustaining action.

The fundamental fact of reality that gives rise to the concept of value is that living beings have to attain certain ends in order to sustain their lives. The facts regarding what enhances or hinders life are objective, founded on the facts of reality, and grounded in cognition. The act of valuation is a type of abstraction. It is a product of the process of concept-formation and use. Objective values are identified by a process of rational cognition. This should not be surprising because people do think, argue, and act as if normative issues can be decided by considering the facts of a situation.

Ethics

Ethics, a code of values to rationally guide man's choices and actions, is an objective, metaphysical necessity for a man's survival. A

proper ethics gives practical guidance to help people think and direct their lives. Ethics aids a man in defining and attaining his values, goals, and happiness. A man needs ethics because he requires values to survive. The telos of ethics is a person's own survival and happiness. The realm of ethics includes those matters that are potentially under a man's control. A man's uncoerced volition is necessary to have an objective theory of morality. He can discover values only through a volitional process of reason.

Rand's ethics identifies the good and bad according to the rational standard of value of man's life qua man. Her Objectivist Ethics focuses on what is, in reality, good or best for each unique individual human being. Such an ethics is rational, objective, and personal. Accordingly, a man's goal should be to become the best possible person in the context of who and what he is and of what is possible for him.

Rand explains that objective and contextual knowledge, including ethical knowledge, can be obtained through rational means. A person requires conceptual knowledge in the form of abstractions to guide his actions. Moral concepts necessarily come into play when one acts. A man needs to acquire knowledge of external reality and self-knowledge in order to discover and choose his values, goals, and actions. He requires knowledge of what is possible and of the potential means to achieve that which is possible.

To acquire knowledge, a person needs to function at a certain level of abstraction. A man subsumes concretes under abstractions and his hierarchy of abstractions leads to general evaluative principles. A principle is a proposition that integrates facts, observations, experiences, and knowledge about subjects and cases. A man needs an adequate set of principles to provide basic guidance in living well. He must consciously identify the principles he wants to live by and must critically evaluate his values and principles.

Rational moral principles guide us toward values and are essential for achieving moral integrity,

character, and happiness. Living by rational principles tends to make principled thought and actions habitual. When we habitually act on sound moral principles we develop virtues and incorporate our moral orientation into our character. Rand connects virtues to the objective requirements of man's survival and flourishing. Moral principles are needed because the standard of survival and flourishing is too abstract. To act in a concrete situation, a man needs to have some basic view of what he is acting for and how he should act. Because actions are subsumed under principles, it is imperative to adopt and automatize good principles. Acting on principles cultivates corresponding virtues which, in turn, leads to value attainment, flourishing, and happiness.

Focus involves a man's decision to activate his mind. A person can choose to make a self-starting decision to stay open to the positive aspects of reality that enable him to gain and keep life-promoting values. Of course, he will also want to be alert for negative aspects of reality that should be avoided. It takes effort to stay in focus by using your free will to mobilize your consciousness and mental resources. Although focus is not automatic and is demanding, it is rewarding, natural, and enjoyable. It takes effort, but does not involve pain or suffering. To be in focus does not involve continuous mental work. Focus, a quality of alertness, is a precondition of awareness of reality and of cognition. It is one's readiness to direct his attention. Focus is immediately available to each individual and has no correlation with his ability to conceptualize, to use logic, to be objective, and so on. Focus comes before any knowledge of methodology. Focus simply means that one is ready to think and to learn and to use the best approach known to him. Focus means readiness to proceed and to turn on the mental mechanism. It is volitional. It is like waking up and saying to yourself that you are alert and ready for whatever the world has in store for you. You are ready to call on whatever ability and power you have and are ready to spring into action. Although mental activity depends upon and presupposes focus, focus does not necessarily involve mental activity. Naturally, when a

person is in focus, he will discover many reasons to use his cognitive abilities.

The choice to focus enters both in the formation of one's ideas, values, and principles, and in keeping his knowledge and values active in mind so that they can frame his actions. Free will is used in the choice to focus or not when determining how one will reach factual and value judgments. A person must be alert for opportunities to form one's ideas, values, and principles. When a man uses volition to focus and think before he decides to accept ideas he is evoking a causal process. A man must also use his free will to be in focus for his thinking to guide his actions. Free will and focus are indispensable in both the critical thought process and in translating thinking into action.

A person uses his free will to determine his focus and how logical to be. Through the employment of his free will, a man forms and selects the principles that underlie his actions. Focusing one's mind, staying in focus, thinking, and critically assessing one's principles includes introspection to identify and assess the principles that one has automatized.

A man who thinks in principles makes himself aware of the best means of attaining his ends in the full context of his life. Moral principles are true in a delimited context. Recognizing the moral context of a situation precedes one's chosen actions in that situation. A man should not evade relevant knowledge nor drop context when he acts. Moral principles are absolute within the context in which they are defined and applied. Of course, some cases will fall outside the context in which they are defined and applicable. It is therefore essential for a person to validate his principles and to understand the contexts that give rise to these principles.

Thinking is needed in order to understand the facts of a situation and to apply appropriate principles to the circumstances. For example, honesty, as a principle, states that it is immoral to misrepresent the truth in a context in which a person's goal is to obtain values from others. It follows that in a different context in which a

person is attempting to use deceit or force in order to gain values from an individual, it is appropriate for the wronged individual to select self-defense as his appropriate principle instead of honesty. The context is different from one calling for honesty on his part.

Honesty is an essential principle because the proper end of a man's actions is his own objective flourishing. The moral appropriateness of honesty is grounded in metaphysics. A person must focus on what reality requires if he is to attain his ends. A person should tell the relevant truth. What the relevant truth is depends on the type of relationship a person has with the individual with whom he is dealing.

In Rand's biocentric ethics moral behavior is judged in relation to achieving specific ends with the final end being an individual's life or flourishing. The act of deciding necessitates the investigation of how an action pertains to what is best for one's own life. This is not done in a duty-based ethic that is limited to precepts and rules. In a duty-oriented ethical system rules or duties are placed between a person and reality. In a biocentric ethics what is moral is the understood and the chosen rather than the imposed and the obeyed. Principles are valuable ethical concepts that do not require imperatives or obligations as their justification.

Altruist moralities hold that morality is painful and difficult and involves ideas such as self-abnegation and self-sacrifice. Contrariwise, an egoist morality, such as the one found in Objectivism, maintains that morality is natural, attractive, and enjoyable. Of course, there is work involved in staying in focus, acquiring knowledge, formulating moral principles, and applying them in the appropriate contexts. Morality is demanding but it is also indispensable and rewarding. Remember, the purpose of morality is to enjoy life, flourish, and be happy.

Unity in Objectivism

Ayn Rand, a supreme systems-builder, understood that all aspects of the universe are interconnected. Metaphysically, there is one uni-

verse in which every entity is related in some way to all the others. No aspect of the total can exist apart from the total. All entities are related through the inexorable laws of cause and effect. No concrete existent is totally isolated without cause and effect. Each entity affects and is affected by the others.

According to Rand, it follows that all true knowledge is interrelated and interconnected properly reflecting the single totality that is the universe. The key is Rand's view that the relationship of a man's consciousness to existence is objective. Through the use of reason and its methods, objective concepts can be formed and brought together according to objective relationships among the many existents. The gaining of objective knowledge is a metaphysically grounded process because all concretes are different and related to every other concrete and to the total that is the universe. Rand emphasized the need to understand the nature of knowledge and its unity and the requirement for a man to interpret and to synthesize knowledge from various specialties and from various levels of abstraction.

Rand explains the key to understanding ethics is found in the concept of value—it is thus located in epistemology and metaphysics. Her revolutionary theory of concepts is what directly led her to innovations in the fields of value theory and ethics and moral philosophy. She saw that standards of value and moral goodness are grounded in the facts of the nature of man and the world objectively understood. Her emphasis on organic unity is marvelously embodied in Objectivism's integrated views on metaphysics, epistemology, value theory and ethics. The reciprocal interactions and interconnections between these areas are such that each supports, affects, and mutually implicates the others and the whole and makes them possible. Rand's revolutionary philosophy has found a way to objectively connect consciousness with actual integration in the real world.