

minimum needed to stave off death, but of what is required for optimal functioning across a life span. We will return to this issue in the next chapter, in our discussion of Ayn Rand's ethical principle that man's *life* is the standard of value.

5. *VOS*, 13, pb 19.
6. 711, pb 679; *FTNI*, 91, pb 78. Ayn Rand's use of the term "religious abstraction" is not an endorsement of theistic or any other religious belief. See her discussion in the Introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of *The Fountainhead*, x-xiii, pb viii-xi.
7. *VOS*, 13; pb 22.
8. Ayn Rand viewed attacks on technology as profoundly anti-man and anti-life. For her position on this, see her essay "The Anti-Industrial Revolution", in *Return of the Primitive: The Anti-Industrial Revolution* (1999), and other essays in that collection.
9. *AS*, 1012, pb 930; *FTNI*, 146-47, pb 120.
10. *VOS*, 13, pb 22.
11. Even "drifting" may be a case of being in focus, if that is a purpose consciously chosen in the knowledge that one needs the rest and that there is nothing else that one ought to be doing. On the other extreme, one can be exerting full concentration and yet be out of focus. The ancient philosopher Thales, as the story goes, while on a walk, was so busy concentrating on the stars that he fell into a well. If so, Thales was *not* in focus! He was not aware of the entire situation, which included the fact that he was out taking a walk. Full focus would have led him, if the astronomical problem was so important, to take a seat somewhere, or lean against a tree.
12. For further discussion of Ayn Rand's concept of "focusing", see Peikoff, *OPAR*, 55-69. Peikoff discusses the relation between the primary choice to focus or not and the choice of action, and in that context he explains how, according to Ayn Rand, man's choices are both caused and free. Our discussion of causality in ch. 5 has perhaps already made clear why, in Ayn Rand's view, causality does not entail determinism. (See above pp. 44-45.)
13. And the philosophical premises that underlie one's values. (See above, p. 34, and *RM*, ch.2.)
14. What appear to be conflicts between thought and emotion are really conflicts between two thoughts. (See above, p. 48.)
15. *AS*, 1020, pb 938; *FTNI*, 160, pb 131.
16. *AS*, 747, pb 590.

9

Ethics: The Objective Foundation

The starting point of ethics

Morality, or ethics, Ayn Rand writes, 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. Ethics, as a science, deals with discovering and defining such a code."¹ Ethics is a *normative* discipline; it is aimed at guiding action.² Since human action is goal-directed, the choices a human being must make are ultimately choices of things to be pursued, i.e., of *values*.

The concept of a *value* is thus, for Ayn Rand, the fundamental concept of ethics. To understand whether there is any reason—any metaphysical basis—for choosing one way of acting rather than another, one set of values rather than another, the first question ethical theory must ask, says Ayn Rand, is:

Why does man need a code of values?

Let me stress this. The first question is not: What particular code of values should man accept? The first question is: Does man need values at all—and why?³

“Value” rests on “life”

To understand why we need values, Ayn Rand asks what they are—i.e., what facts of reality give rise to the concept of *value*.⁴

She answers as follows:

“Value” is that which one acts to gain and/or keep. 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 no values are possible.⁵

A *value*, we will agree, is not just a wish. For something to be of value to someone, he must be prepared, under appropriate conditions, to *act* for it (or if he already possesses it, to act, when necessary, to retain or preserve it.) A value is the object of goal-directed action.

But goal-directed action presupposes an entity capable of that action, and the value is a value *to that entity*. That’s the “to *whom*”.

Finally, for something to be a value to an entity, the achievement of that goal must *make some difference to that entity*. It must “face an alternative”, in the sense that, if its action achieves that goal one thing happens to it, and if it doesn’t something else happens (or the initial thing fails to happen.) That’s the “for *what*”. The entity needn’t be conscious of the alternative, but it must *face* it, in the sense that the outcome for the entity depends on *how the entity acts*.

One value may make a difference to the achievement of some further value. The “alternative” the entity faces in pursuing the first value, then, is whether it will, by its own action, achieve that further value or not. But what difference is made by the achievement of that further value? Is there, Ayn Rand asks, some *fundamental* alternative that every value-pursuer faces, to which every value makes a difference? Is there some alternative that gives rise to the fact that there is value-pursuit at all? Her answer is Yes, in a passage we have already met, which is worth quoting again, this time in full:

There is only one fundamental alternative in the universe: existence or non-existence—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. If an organism fails in that action, it dies; its chemical elements remain, but its life goes out of existence. It is only the concept of “Life” that makes the concept of “Value” possible. It is only to a living entity that things can be good or evil.⁶

The root of the phenomenon, and the concept, of value is, thus, the conditional character of life. Values exist because living things need to act to obtain specific objects in order to survive. It is not just that an organism must be alive in order to act. It is that it must act in order to remain alive.⁷

Life is thus the end for which values exist. It is, then, a living thing’s *ultimate value*, i.e., its “final goal or end to which all lesser goals are the means.” This final goal or end “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*.”⁸

The conditional character of life thus gives rise also to the concept of what an entity *should* or *ought* to do. It *should* do that which it *must* do *if* it is to continue to exist. Only the conditional character of life gives rise to the *need* to act one way rather than another, and so gives reason to act one way rather than another. As Ayn Rand sums it up, “the fact that a living entity *is*, determines what it *ought* to do.”⁹

Man’s life as the standard of moral value

Living things other than man act automatically to sustain their lives. Man does not. He is not born knowing how to survive, nor does he automatically pursue self-preservation. Man’s basic means of survival is his conceptual faculty, reason, but the exercise of reason is volitional.

Man must choose to think. He must choose to value his life. He must choose to discover the values his life requires. He must define these values conceptually, and choose to act on them. “A code of values accepted by choice is a code of morality.”¹⁰ Man needs a moral code—a hierarchically structured and integrated set of moral values—in order to live. “Ethics,” as Ayn Rand writes, “is *not* a mystic

fantasy—nor a social convention—nor a dispensable, subjective luxury, to be switched or discarded in any emergency. Ethics is an *objective, metaphysical necessity of man's survival* . . . ”¹¹

To guide his choices—to identify what is good for him or evil—man needs a *standard* of value. Man has a nature, he is a certain type of living being, and so the fundamental requirements of survival will be the same for all men. “The standard of value of the Objectivist ethics . . . is *man's life*, or: that which is required for man's survival *qua* man. Since reason is man's basic means of survival, that which is proper to the life of a rational being is the good, that which negates, opposes, or destroys it is the evil.”¹²

The requirements of survival must be gauged, Ayn Rand explains, across a lifetime. A rational being projects into the future, plans long-range, sees his life as a whole, acts for long-range goals. No benefits can be measured short-term; they must be judged according as they support and further the knowledge, commitments, skills, activities, and enjoyments that maintain a human being across a life span. As noted in the previous chapter, survival does not mean staving off death.¹³

“Man's survival *qua* man” means the terms, methods, conditions and goals required for the survival of a rational being through the whole of his lifespan—in all those aspects of existence which are open to his choice.¹⁴

Reason, Purpose, Self-Esteem

What, then, does man's survival require? Ayn Rand defines three cardinal values “which, together, are the means to and the realization of one's ultimate value, one's own life.”¹⁵ They are: Reason, Purpose, Self-Esteem. To each of these values there corresponds a virtue—a mode of action necessary to achieve that value. We will discuss each of the virtues in the next chapter and that discussion will enrich our understanding of these values. But we can indicate the essential content of each of the three values now.

Man's basic means of survival is *reason*. He must value that faculty. He must act to develop it, he must incorporate it into every part of his life, he must place its judgment above all else.

Man's survival requires that he be purposeful in every aspect of his life. It requires that he define his values clearly and pursue them passionately. He must define a central productive *purpose*—his work—

by which he supports his life, and he must integrate all his other purposes to that one.

To passionately pursue his own purposes as they are defined by his own reason, a man must profoundly value himself and his mind. He must have *self-esteem*. Ayn Rand defines self-esteem as “[the] inviolate certainty that [one's] mind is competent to think and [one's] person is worthy of happiness, which means: is worthy of living.”¹⁶

What does Ayn Rand mean by saying that these three values are not only the means to but also *the realization of one's life*? The answer lies in the fact that life is a process of self-sustaining action. The fundamental values that sustain a life will necessarily *constitute* that life. To live a life guided by reason, in which rational purposes are pursued and achieved, and in which one profoundly values one's mind and person, *is to achieve one's life*.

Life and happiness

“Happiness,” Ayn Rand writes, “is that state of consciousness which proceeds from the achievement of one's values.” It is “a state of “non-contradictory joy.” As such, it can be achieved only if one's values are non-contradictory, i.e., only if they are all rational values that serve one's life. Otherwise, to satisfy one value is to betray another, leaving one wracked with conflict.

The maintenance of life and the pursuit of happiness are not two separate issues. To hold one's own life as one's ultimate value, and one's own happiness as one's highest purpose are two aspects of the same achievement. Existentially, the activity of pursuing rational goals is the activity of maintaining one's life; psychologically, its result, reward and concomitant is an emotional state of happiness.¹⁷

In maintaining that one's own life is one's ultimate value and one's own happiness is one's highest moral purpose, Ayn Rand is advocating an ethics of self-interest. In insisting that life and happiness can be achieved only if one holds man's life as the standard of moral value and defines one's interests rationally, she is advocating an ethics of *rational self-interest*. It is worth noting that many advocates and most critics of an ethics of self-interest define a person's interests as whatever he happens to desire. Ayn Rand does not. She defines a

human being's *actual* self-interest, by reference to what a human being actually *is*—viz., a living being whose means of survival is reason. And based on that, she is able to show, as we will discuss in the next chapter, that the interests of rational men do not conflict—that, in fact, there is a fundamental harmony of interests among rational men.

The choice to live and the objectivity of value

"My morality," says John Galt in *Atlas Shrugged*, "the morality of reason, is contained in a single axiom: existence exists—and in a single choice: to live. The rest proceeds from these."¹⁸

Similarly, in her essay, "Causality Versus Duty", Ayn Rand writes: "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."¹⁹

It is in choosing to live that a man establishes his own life as his ultimate value. Once he has done so, the axiom of existence (in the form of its corollary, the law of causality) does the rest, determining what is required to achieve that ultimate value. Moral "imperatives" are thus all of them hypothetical. There are no "categorical imperatives", no unchosen duties. Morality rests on a fundamental, pre-moral choice.

But that does not render moral values subjective, i.e., inventions of consciousness, or irrational. Just as one cannot ask for proof of an axiom, but must understand that all proof rests on the self-evident fact expressed in the axiom, so one cannot ask why one should choose to live, because all "should"s rest on that choice. If one actually chooses not to live, one makes oneself a nonentity, first figuratively, then literally. The choice to live is the choice to accept reality, to accept the fact that one *is* alive. That acceptance together with the law of causality provides the factual basis for morality.

Moral values are not subjective. Neither are they intrinsic features of reality. Moral values each have a "to whom" and a "for what". They identify the relationship of the valued object to a man's life. And they are each "*an evaluation* of the facts of reality by man's consciousness according to a rational standard of value."²⁰ They are factual relationships, *as identified* by a volitional consciousness using a method that derives both from the facts and from the nature of that consciousness. That is to say, according to Ayn Rand, moral values are *objective*.

Having examined the foundation of the Objectivist ethics, and its fundamental values, we turn now to the virtues that support these values, and the principles governing the proper relationships between and among men.

Endnotes

1. *VOS*, 2, pb. 13. The major sources for Ayn Rand's ethical theory are Galt's speech in *Atlas Shrugged; The Virtue of Selfishness*, especially its initial essay, "The Objectivist Ethics" (1961); and "Causality Versus Duty" (1970), *PWNI*, ch 10.
2. *RM*, 21, pb 18.
3. *VOS*, 2, pb 14.
4. In doing so, she is applying her general method for understanding and validating any concept. See above, p. 65.
5. *VOS*, 5, pb 16.
6. *VOS*, 5, pb 16 (quoting from *AS*, 1012-13, pb 931).
7. To make the point that *only* living things face alternatives, Ayn Rand projects an "immortal, indestructible robot, an entity which moves and acts, but which cannot be affected by anything, which cannot be changed in any respect, which cannot be damaged, injured or destroyed," and argues that it could not have any *values* (*VOS*, 5-6; pb 16.) The example is developed further by Peikoff, *OPAR*, 209-11, who explains why psychological factors could not provide a basis for values apart from their relation to life.
8. *VOS*, 7, pb 17.
9. *VOS*, 8, pb 18.
10. *VOS*, 16, pb 25 (quoted from *AS* 1013, pb 932).
11. *VOS*, 16, pb 24.
12. *VOS*, 16, pb 25. "Qua" is Latin, and means here "insofar as he is".
13. Ch. 8, n. 4.
14. *VOS*, 18, pb 26.
15. *VOS*, 19-20, pb 27.
16. *AS*, 1018, pb 936, *FTNI*, 157, pb 128.
17. The three quotations are, respectively from *VOS*, 24, pb 31 (quoted from *AS*, 1014, pb 932); 25, pb 32 (*AS*, 1022, pb 939); 25, pb 32.
18. *AS*, 1018, pb 936; *FTNI*, 156, pb 128.
19. *PWNI*, 118, pb 99.
20. *ÇUI*, 14, pb 22. See also Peikoff, *OPAR*, 241-48.

Virtue, Self and Others

(with a brief look at
Politics and Esthetics)

The virtues

The fundamental values required for man's survival are constants. Reason. Purpose. Self-Esteem. These are values which one must develop and achieve throughout one's life.

One develops and maintains these values, Ayn Rand holds, by consistent, dedicated, passionate action. If one's reason is consistently to be one's guide, one must choose to think—consistently and passionately. If one wishes to achieve rationally defined purposes, one must work for them—consistently and passionately. If one wishes to achieve authentic self-esteem, one must, in one's actions, earn one's own deepest respect—consistently and passionately. These consistent, passionate courses of action, aimed at achieving those values, are the expression of *virtues*.

"*Value*", she writes, "is that which one acts to gain and/or keep—*virtue* is the act by which one gains and/or keeps it."¹ A virtue is a policy or mode of action. But successful action must proceed from knowledge.

Thus, in her fullest account of the virtues—in Galt's speech in *Atlas Shrugged*—Ayn Rand begins the exposition of each virtue with the words "is the recognition of the fact that." In each case the fact recognized is a fact concerning the proper use of one's consciousness necessary to achieve the values required for man's survival.

Ayn Rand identifies seven virtues. In her essay, "The Objectivist Ethics", rationality, productiveness, and pride are presented as each corresponding to one of the three cardinal values—reason, purpose, and self-esteem. The remaining four virtues—*independence, integrity, honesty, and justice*—are presented as aspects of rationality. For ease of organization we will follow this account. (In the presentation in Galt's speech, the four virtues just named come immediately after rationality, and productiveness and pride follow them.) We will find it helpful to quote extensively, from both presentations.²

Rationality, Productiveness, Pride

Rationality, Ayn Rand begins, "is the recognition of the fact that existence exists, that nothing can alter the truth and nothing can take precedence over that act of perceiving it, which is thinking." It is the "acceptance of reason as one's only source of knowledge, one's only judge of values and one's only guide to action. 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." One accepts no substitute for reason, neither feeling nor "faith" nor any other alleged short-cut to knowledge.

Rationality is man's basic virtue. "And his basic vice, the source of all his evils is . . . the act of blanking out, the willful suspension of one's consciousness, the refusal to think." This is the act of evasion, of unfocusing one's mind. It is the essence of irrationality, and the source of all acts of destruction.

Productiveness "is your acceptance of morality, your recognition of the fact that you choose to live—that productive work is the process by which man's consciousness controls his existence, a constant process of acquiring knowledge and shaping matter to fit one's purpose, of translating an idea into physical form, of remaking the earth in the image of one's values."

Productive work "calls upon the highest attributes of [man's] character: his creative ability, his ambitiousness, his self-assertiveness, his refusal to bear uncontested disasters." Productiveness, as we have discussed, extends beyond productive work, which is its center, to an overall purposefulness. This is a commitment to form and identify rational values in all areas of one's life—including work, love, art, recreation, and the building of one's character (which we will discuss next)—and to pursue them with a passionate, focused intensity.

Pride “is the recognition of the fact that you are your own highest value and, like all of man’s values, it has to be earned—that of any achievements open to you, the one that makes all others possible is the creation of your own character—that your character, your actions, your desires, your emotions are the products of the premises held by your mind—that as man must produce the physical values he needs to sustain his life, so he must acquire the values of character that make his life worth sustaining—that as man is a being of self-made wealth, so he is a being of self-made soul.”

“The virtue of Pride can best be described by the term: ‘moral ambitiousness’.” It is the commitment to the highest rational standards for oneself. Pride is, in Aristotle’s words, “the crown of the virtues”—it carries a commitment to the fullest practice of all the other virtues. And it includes a proud rejection of any doctrine calling for the sacrifice of one’s mind or one’s values to any alleged “higher good”.

Independence, Integrity, Honesty, Justice

Independence “is the recognition of the fact that yours is the responsibility of judgment and nothing can help you to escape it . . .” It is the commitment to think for oneself, and to live by the work of one’s own mind. Independence of thought and independence in action. In one’s interaction with others, one produces or creates value, and then trades values with others. This applies both in the material and in the spiritual realm, in friendship and love (on which see below). The fundamental contribution independence makes to human survival is dramatized with great power in every line of *The Fountainhead*, especially in the moral character and life of Howard Roark.³

Integrity “is the recognition of the fact that you cannot fake your consciousness . . .—that man is an indivisible entity, an integrated unit of two attributes: of matter and consciousness, and that he may permit no breach between body and mind, between action and thought, between his life and his convictions . . .” It means that one must act on one’s convictions, never sacrificing them “to the opinions or wishes of others.” The fact at the basis of this virtue is the metaphysical thesis, discussed in ch. 5, of the fundamental harmony of mind and body.

Honesty “is the recognition of the fact that the unreal is unreal and can have no value, that neither love nor fame nor cash is a value if obtained by fraud—that an attempt to gain a value by deceiving the mind of others is an act of raising your victims to a position higher than

reality, where you become a pawn of their blindness, a slave of their non-thinking and their evasions, while their intelligence, their rationality, their perceptiveness become the enemies you have to dread and flee . . .” Honesty, for Ayn Rand, is a profoundly *selfish* virtue, which keeps you in full contact with reality, allows you control over your existence, and allows you to benefit from the rationality of others, rather than setting it and them against you.

Justice “is the recognition of the fact that you cannot fake the character of men as you cannot fake the character of nature, that you must judge all men as conscientiously as you judge inanimate objects, with the same respect for truth, with the same incorruptible vision, by as pure and as *rational* a process of identification—that every man must be judged for what he *is* and treated accordingly . . .” Justice, too, is a profoundly selfish virtue: in rewarding the good in others and penalizing the evil, one fosters a world in which the men of rationality, productiveness and justice—whose own selfish actions further your life—thrive, and in which the irrational and destructive are thwarted.

There is a wealth more to say about Ayn Rand’s view of each of these virtues and their application to the full range of situations and circumstances in life.⁴ The place to start, for further study, is with the heroes in Ayn Rand’s novels, particularly *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*. Their lives and actions are powerful concretizations of each of these virtues.

The harmony of rational interests

We have already observed that if a man’s “interests” are defined in the standard way as the satisfaction of whatever desires he happens to have, then conflicts within a man and, we may now add, between men are inevitable. Much contemporary moral philosophy, in fact, takes the existence of conflicts of interest between men as an axiom and attempts to build a moral theory on that premise. Ayn Rand rejects the notion of “interests” on which such theories rest.

Her approach, as we have seen, is to define man’s *actual* interests by reference to his nature as a living being whose means of survival is his reason. It is in man’s *interest* to live. It is in his *interest* to be rational, productive, self-valuing; it is in his *interest* to be independent, to have integrity, to be honest, and to be just. It is in his *interest* to trade value for value with others and not in his interest to gain values from others through deception or the use of physical force. It is in his

interest to base his interests on reality and not see his interests as requiring that he gets whatever he wishes regardless of circumstances. It is in his *interest* to hold the context of the benefits he receives from living in a society in which other men are free to pursue their own self-interest and not to claim that it is a sacrifice of his interests if another human being is not voluntarily willing to give him something he would like, be it a job or love or anything else. The interests of rational men do *not* conflict.⁵

Love and sex

Love is the expression of one's values, the greatest reward you can earn for the moral qualities you have achieved in your character and person, the emotional price paid by one man for the joy he receives from the virtues of another.⁶

Love is a response to values. It is with a person's sense of life that one falls in love—with that essential sum, that fundamental stand or way of facing existence, which is the essence of a personality. One falls in love with the embodiment of the values that formed a person's character, which are reflected in his widest goals or smallest gestures, which create the *style* of his soul—the individual style of a unique, unrepeatable, irreplaceable consciousness. It is one's own sense of life that acts as the selector, and responds to what it recognizes as one's own basic values in the person of another. It is not a matter of professed convictions (though these are not irrelevant); it is a matter of much more profound, conscious *and subconscious* harmony.⁷

Ayn Rand viewed work and the person one loves as the two existential values of greatest importance in a rational man's life, and the greatest sources of happiness. But one cannot put love first. Love is possible only to self-sufficient individuals of developed character and self-esteem—rational, productive, proud individuals.

Sex is the most intense pleasure possible to man, when it unites the material and spiritual aspects of rational, self-valuing individuals. It is thus a central component of man's happiness. It is a form of celebration—of oneself, of the partner one loves, and of life. But that experience is possible only to those who have something to celebrate. Many people “[try] to gain self-esteem from sexual adventures—which

can't be done, because sex is not the cause, but an effect and an expression of a man's sense of his own value.”⁸

Politics: a brief look

Let us, in the available space, just indicate the central theses and main line of argument of Ayn Rand's political philosophy. The argument starts from a moral principle that so far has been mentioned only in passing—the evil of initiating physical force against others.

This principle is grounded in the fact that man's means of survival is reason and that the initiation of force stultifies reason. The man who abandons an independent reliance on his own reason in favor of using force on others depends on their rationality, yet he acts to harm and destroy it and them. Force is destructive both of the victim and of the force's initiator. The basic political principle of Ayn Rand's politics, then, is that no man may initiate the use of force against others. All human relations must be voluntary, based on trade (of both material and spiritual values) for mutual benefit.

The principle that no one may initiate the use of force entails that each man should be free to take the actions he judges his survival requires. This principle is the basis for the existence of *individual rights*. “A right,” says Ayn Rand, “is a moral principle defining and sanctioning a man's freedom of action in a social context.” Rights are “conditions of existence required by man's nature for his proper survival.” The fundamental right is the right to life, which is the source of all other rights, including the rights to liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness. The right to property is crucial. If a man has no right to keep the product of his efforts, then he is not able to sustain his life.

“A government,” says Ayn Rand, “is an institution that has the exclusive power to *enforce* certain rules of social conduct in a given geographical area.” The sole purpose of government is to protect men's rights, by protecting men against force or fraud. “*A government is the means of placing the retaliatory use of force under objective control—i.e. under objectively defined laws.*”

There are no “economic rights”. There should be a total separation of state and economics for the same reasons that there is (or should be) a separation of state and church.

It follows from all of the above that the only proper social system is one that protects individual rights, including property rights, in which all property is privately owned—that is, *laissez-faire capitalism*.