

## Books

# Flourishing Objectivism

*Lester Hunt*

*Viable Values: A Study of The Root And Reward of Morality*

Tara Smith

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vii + 204, index

Tara Smith's *Viable Values: A Study of the Root and Reward of Morality* is an attempt to both reconstruct and defend Ayn Rand's ethics. Though it is rather brief, considering the size of the task toward which it is aimed, it achieves depth by concentrating on the essentials of its subject. There is no sustained discussion of casuistical applications or epistemological assumptions. Individual virtues are only discussed as illustrations of more theoretical topics. Potentially interesting side-issues are for the most part avoided. However, with the questions upon which it is so ruthlessly focused, it succeeds admirably well. On any number of points, it makes interesting and illuminating contributions to the ongoing discussion of these issues. There are few philosophical books from which I have learned so much in recent years. It is also, I am very glad to say, engagingly written, with a direct, unpretentious style and a great wealth of illustrative examples. Though many may disagree with it, I don't see how anyone could say that it is boring.

In what follows, I can do no more than to give a general notion of the course that Smith's argument takes, indicate a few of its features that I find especially interesting, and make some remarks that, I hope, will push the discussion a bit further along.

## Intrinsic Value

The basic question the book raises, its answer providing the basis for all that follows, is a familiar one in ethics: "Why be moral?" By this question Smith does not mean to ask what weighty motive individuals have for following particular injunctions of morality. She does address that question eventually, but she regards it as derivative from the question she does mean to ask, which is: What reasons do we have for drawing the sorts of distinctions that morality draws? More generally, she means to ask: What reason do we have to think that individuals should live in one way as opposed to another? The answers to these questions will indicate what the point of morality is, and this in turn will be the basis for judgments about its content, for judgments about which of the possible moral codes is the right one. In morality, the *what* follows from the *why*.

In the first three chapters, Smith turns, after a useful overview of the argument of the book, to discussing various potential answers to her version of the *why be moral* question, answers that might come from four traditional ethical theories: intuitionism, contractarianism, rationalism, and the notion that moral distinctions can in some way be anchored in the notion of intrinsic value. There is much that is of interest in these discussions, but perhaps the most interesting part, and certainly the most important for the subsequent argument of the book, is the discussion of intrinsic value. There Smith makes the telling point (among others) that belief in intrinsic value often seems to be based on an equivocation between two things that "intrinsic value" can mean. The meanings she has in mind are these: 1) this phrase could mean that the thing involved is good because of its own nature, and not because of its relations to anything else (including especially the agent who values it); and 2) it could mean that the thing is pursued as an end in itself. The fallacious inference goes from the notion that some things are pursued as good in themselves to the conclusion that they are good for the reason described in (1). Smith points out that from the fact that something is actually pursued as good in itself, nothing follows about why it is good (or whether it is really any good at all): in particular, it cannot accomplish the main

objective of those who believe in intrinsic values, which is to show that value is objective (64).

I would add that there is another, rather closely related, basis for believing in intrinsic value in sense (1), which is the assumption that some things are *worthy* of being pursued as ends in themselves. This reasoning would hold that, supposing some things should be pursued as ends in themselves, that could only be because of their own internal nature. I would point out that there is another possible reason: ends could be worth pursuing as ends in themselves because of their relation to the agent who values them. As an illustration of the possibility that things can be good in precisely this way, I submit Aristotle's theory of friendship. It argues that, at least for virtuous people, being with one's friends is good in itself (and not good merely because of some future goods one intends to use them to bring about) and that the reason for this is to be found in various facts (mostly facts that we today would call psychological) about virtuous people themselves. Smith never explicitly discusses the possibility of things being good in this third way: worth pursuing in themselves, but in (and not out of) relation to the agent. I will comment further on this omission below.

In Chapter 4, Smith begins her (and Rand's) own answer to the *why be moral* question. It begins with a pair of definitions. *Morality* is a code of *values* of a certain sort, and a value is that which one seeks to gain and/or keep (84). Moral values are ones that are pursued by choice and are more fundamental than other values (118). As to why there are values, the answer is simple and, to students of Rand, familiar: there is only one class of entities for which anything is ever good or bad, and that is living beings. Things that promote the survival of a given organism are good for that organism, and things that tend to thwart it are bad for it. Human beings are able to choose or reject life and to choose values that support it. Given that the resulting values are hierarchical, with some more fundamental than others, the needed scheme of values will constitute a moral code.

Smith emphasizes that the potentially vast web of moral distinctions only pops into existence because (and *if*) one chooses life. As to whether one should choose to live, there is no rational answer to

that question. "All 'shoulds' depend on purposes" (107). Here I suspect that Smith (and possibly Rand) is being needlessly paradoxical. Note that the same argument would seem to imply that one cannot make any moral judgments about people who do not take the option of life. Moral values apply to one because they promote one's life: if I have no desire to live, they do not apply to me. One trouble with this is that, purely as a matter of anecdotal psychology, it seems to me that there are a significant number of people who do not, in any relevant sense, desire to promote their own lives. This class includes a great many criminals and people we would ordinarily think of as morally evil.

### Opting for Life

Take—because it is a fairly familiar one—the case of Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of Richard Wright's realistic novel *Native Son*. Here is someone who drifts from one petty crime to another, responds to suggestions that he get a job or do something to improve his life with surly indifference, and gets into random fistfights with his "friends." In order to avoid being caught in a relatively petty misdemeanor, he smothers a girl to death without quite realizing what he is doing. Later, when it occurs to him that it will be difficult to run from the police without leaving his girlfriend behind to tell them what she knows, he bashes her head with a brick and dumps her body down a ventilation shaft, despite the fact that the police have already surrounded the area he is in and there is no real hope of escaping from them anyway. Wright's portrait of Bigger Thomas is a convincing picture, reenforced by many television interviews with real criminals and scoundrels, of a person who does not form intentions or make choices in terms of their impact on his life in the long run. He is able to value concrete, particular objects, such as a sandwich and a glass of milk in front of him, but not his life. For that he would need some mental connection, however dim, with "the big picture," with what his life amounts to. And apparently he does not.

One may be inclined to think that there is something terribly wrong here, that it is tragic to waste the great gift of life in this way.

One may also think that this indifference to one's own life is the root reason why such people are evil, that it is their fundamental moral error. The position that Smith adopts would seem to mean that we can pass no such judgments as these, that we can pass no moral judgments here at all. If that seems to be a comfortable position, consider that it would seem to imply that there can be no moral reason for punishing such a person, or for punishing them more or less than a certain amount. Such reasons would have to be based on judgments about the guilt of the individual, but here there can be no guilt in such cases. The individual involved happens not to desire the end (life) toward which distinctions of right and wrong are means.

The reason why Smith's position has these curious implications lies in the fact that the values of which morality consists are conceived very narrowly as purposes, actual purposes that the individual currently seeks. It would be as wrong to make judgments of value about a person who does not value his or her life as it would be to say that I should install a device in my car to make it go very fast whereas I do not want to drive a fast car and do not desire anything that requires me to do so. We could avoid the implications of this view if we were to conceive of these values, not as occurrent purposes, but as goods. We could say that individuals like Bigger have committed a mistake in that, had they lived differently, had they made other choices long ago, they would have lived lives that are *good*, or at least *better than* the ones they actually led. Perhaps Smith would reject this view on the grounds that it necessarily rests on the idea of intrinsic value. But this is not true. One could say that the life Bigger would have lived would have been better *for him*, because of his own nature as an individual and as a human being, than the hellish existence to which he actually doomed himself. The conception of the good is not intrinsic but relational. "Intrinsic," in sense (1), does not mean "independent of the agent's occurrent desires"; it means, in effect, "independent of the agent altogether, and everything else."

### Flourishing and Survival

Chapter 5 is of particular interest because it concerns a potentially

important revision that Smith introduces into Rand's theory. It comes at a crucial juncture in the theory. So far, Smith, and Rand, have argued that people—given that they choose to live—should live by a moral code that enables them to survive. But, rather obviously, mere survival cannot be the whole point of a moral code. It is at this point that Rand speaks of "happiness" as the result and reward of living in a life-sustaining manner. Smith chooses instead to speak of "flourishing" because, she tells us, "happiness" tends to suggest a condition that could simply befall someone, while "flourishing" is, grammatically at least, something that one does (125). Smith seems to be saying, at this point, that "flourishing" better fits what Rand meant than "happiness" does. The change she is introducing, however, may be more substantive than that. She actually retains the term "happiness," defining it as "the feeling of flourishing" (137). "Flourishing" does not merely translate "happiness" into other terminology: it is a new term. She uses it to solve a problem with which any defense of the Objectivist ethics must grapple. Having apparently argued that survival is a standard by which we can judge the particular values that people pursue, she must now expand that standard into something that is a more plausible candidate for the position of *the* standard by which moral values may be measured.

Though she never puts it this way, what she argues for in effect is this. The conclusion that was actually established by the original argument was the idea that *life* is the standard of value. In some contexts (perhaps when we are speaking of the lower animals), this standard may be treated as equivalent to mere survival, a matter of metabolic processes. In human beings however, life does not mean survival but thriving, and in particular when we come to developing an ethical theory this is the aspect that is overwhelmingly important. Much of her argument consists of her efforts to do away with reasons for thinking that flourishing and survival are, as standards of value, somehow sharply different. One such reason is the idea that, since survival is something we need, while flourishing is merely something we want, the two standards differ in the way that want-satisfaction differs from need-satisfaction, which (the objection alleges) is a profound difference indeed. Smith argues, convincingly, I think, that

the idea that there is a profound difference between needs and wants rests on an excessively narrow conception of needs. Many needs, she argues, lack the brute physical necessity that characterizes our need to survive.

Another reason for thinking that flourishing and survival are sharply different is the notion that the distinction between them is simply the distinction between quantity of life and quality of life: these, once again, are alleged to be profoundly different things. In response, Smith argues that the distinction between quality and quantity is not as "clear cut" here as it is when we are talking about hamburger. After all, your life cannot have any quality at all unless it has some quantity (zero apparently not counting as a quantity, in this context) and it cannot have any quantity unless it has some quality or other (132). At this point, I am afraid I found myself wondering whether the same thing cannot be said of hamburger.

Nonetheless, it seems clear to me that Smith is onto something here: survival and flourishing do not really seem to function as separate standards at all. For me, at least, her most compelling argument on this point comes when she points out that even when we evaluate the well-being of the lower animals, the standard of survival cannot really be applied in complete isolation from flourishing-related concepts (126–27). An animal that is merely holding its own is regarded as less fit to survive than one that is actually growing. The best evidence that an organism is meeting the conditions required for its survival is that it is flourishing.

Smith's discussion of the relation between survival and flourishing is full of interest and—unusual in a work of academic philosophy—characterized by wise insight into the conduct of life. It is certainly a significant contribution to the study of Objectivist ethics. I should emphasize, however, that in introducing and developing the idea of flourishing, she is revising Rand's ethical theory, and that the revision may be important.

Before going on to another topic, I should mention that there is a substantial literature—going back at least as far as the work of Rasmussen and Den Uyl—which began in the early 1980's, in which the consequences of formulating a broadly Objectivist ethics in terms

of flourishing have been addressed.<sup>1</sup> It is unfortunate that Smith does not mention this literature in her book. I am looking forward to seeing her discuss it in print and explaining how her own formulations are different from and superior to the various earlier attempts.

### Ends in Themselves

The possibility that the introduction of the idea of flourishing is indeed important is brought into the foreground when Smith explains the peculiar relationship between the goal of moral conduct, conceived as flourishing, and that conduct itself. Just as a golfer does not putt *in order to* play golf, but as a *part* of playing golf, so the virtuous person acts well as a part of flourishing. "The activity of flourishing is what the end of value consists of. Proper action is constitutive of flourishing" (128). This idea, I believe, is sound doctrine, but its relations with the rest of Smith's views, and with some tendencies in Rand's work, are ambiguous and potentially troublesome. To the extent that conduct is related to flourishing in this way, it will be good in the "third way" I mentioned above: that is, it will be worth pursuing in itself, but will not be worth pursuing solely because of its own internal, out-of-context nature. If we suppose that the value which is the purpose of the act is flourishing, then the relationship between the act and the value is not cause-effect but part-whole. This would mean that the act is worth doing *in itself*, since the goal is already realized (partly, at any rate) once the act itself is done. However, because the act is worth doing because it is part of *the agent's* flourishing, it is worth doing because of a relation it has to the agent, and is not intrinsically good in the out-of-context manner of sense (1).

What is somewhat worrisome is the fact that this way in which something can be good—good in itself but not intrinsically good—seems to play no role in the rest of Smith's book. As I mentioned earlier on, she never explicitly envisions this sort of goodness and she generally tends to rely exclusively on a very different set of concepts. Generally, she seems to think of the values that are promoted by conduct as causal consequences that one's conduct brings about in

the future. This consequentialist way of viewing values makes perfect sense if we are only thinking of the end as survival but, as Smith indirectly shows, it does not fit so well if the end we envision is flourishing.

Her general persistence in viewing value in this way somewhat cramps the style of the last sections of the book, in which she considers the profoundly important matter of the relationship between the interests of different human beings. There she is concerned to defend the classic Objectivist tenets that (a) the interests of different individuals are not by nature opposed and that (b) they never actually conflict at all. Her defense of these tenets is well worth close study, especially her use of the notion of flourishing in this context (see p. 183). But it seems to me to be constrained by a notion of the interrelations of the interests of different human beings that is unnecessarily narrow. For the most part, it is derived from claims to the effect that the things that we gain from others in violation of their rights will do us no good, and that the things those rights prevent us from getting do not count as losses because we did not get them in the first place. The cases she seems to have in mind are those of strangers or people who might as well be strangers, in that their interests are entirely external to one another: business competitors, trading partners, or relatives who seem to be connected only by the fact that each has a chance to inherit the same money. Of course, such cases, in which the main issue as far as my interests are concerned is what might or might not be given to or taken away from me, are extremely important—especially in the context of political philosophy.

But in much of our lives, the relationships that hold between our individual interests and those of others do not seem to be like this at all. What I have in mind primarily is that part of life that is occupied with those relationships of intimacy in which we value other individuals for themselves. The paradigms of such relationships are those that hold between friends and lovers. Here, interests seem to be related, not as cause and effect merely, but also as part and whole: I am glad to know of the good fortune of a friend, as if my own well-being is thereby (to some extent) immediately increased. This seems

to explain why we promote the well-being of our friends as ends in themselves: we do not see their interests as external to ours. Of course, it is conceivable that this perception might be an illusion, but it certainly should be of interest to those who do ethics from an Objectivist point of view, since it suggests that an examination of love and friendship are crucial for a full understanding of the way in which the interests of different human beings are related. The fact that Smith does not examine them in this book does not imply any fault in what she does say there, as far as it goes; it only means, at least to me, that more needs to be done.

### Principle

Toward the beginning of the last chapter, "Principled Egoism: The Only Way to Live," Smith makes a comment that I think is, though undoubtedly true, potentially misleading. After pointing out that Rand's egoism follows immediately—without a separate additional argument—from her justification of morality itself, she points out that the egoism it requires cannot involve solving practical problems on a case-by-case basis. It must rely strongly on principles. The first reason she gives (163) for this idea is based on the limitations of human consciousness: faced with almost any practical decision, it would be impossible to recall all of the particular facts that are relevant. The idea seems to be that principle functions as a sort of compact substitute for a vast array of individual perceptions and memory images. While it is true that one of the cognitive functions of conceptual consciousness is that it enables us to rely, in our conduct, on individual truths about concretes that we cannot currently perceive or remember as such, I suspect that this idea is liable to lead us in the wrong direction if we are looking for an adequate account of the role of practical principles in ethics.

Consider, as a piece of evidence concerning what *would* be required for such an account, Smith's defense of the idea that honesty is a requirement of effective egoism (166–67). She gives three reasons why dishonesty cannot be expected to be in an individual's interest: first, a lie will fail to eliminate the troublesome fact that is

temporarily concealed by it; second, it will create a necessity to maintain the deception in the future; and, third, it will make future acts of honesty more difficult. Note that these ideas, which all take the form of probabilistic statements about the future, are all ones that cannot be justified simply by sensory perceptions of present events or by memory-images of past ones. This is true even if we pile a great many such experiences together, and even if we find a way to condense them into some handier sort of form. To solve the relevant problems, consciousness apparently must carry out functions that are radically different in kind from those it carries out on the level of perception and memory. I would expect the differences to be more important than the similarities.

### A Major Contribution

On every topic that Tara Smith discusses, she has a valuable contribution to make. I have barely begun to discuss the many interesting questions raised in *Viable Values*. Many people will disagree with what she says in it, but one thing about it is obvious: anyone with a serious interest in Objectivist ethics will need to read this book.

### Notes

1. See, especially, Rasmussen and Den Uyl 1991. I hope I will be viewed with indulgence for mentioning in this company my own contribution to this literature, a paper delivered at the 1996 meetings of the Ayn Rand Society, for which Tara Smith served as commentator. It was eventually published as Hunt 1999.

### References

- Hunt, Lester. 1999. Flourishing egoism. *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16, no. 1 (Winter): 72–95.
- Rasmussen, Douglas and Douglas J. Den Uyl. 1991. *Liberty and Nature: An Aristotelian Defense of Liberal Order*. La Salle, Illinois: Open Court.