

Teaching Ayn Rand's Version of Ethical Egoism¹

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Introduction

In this brief note, I wish to spell out a way to present Ayn Rand's rational egoism in an introductory college ethics course. As I do this, it will become evident where I believe lie the strengths of—and some of the problems with—the position. I consider Rand's Objectivist ethics as a variety of ethical egoism, one of the several often-discussed ethical systems in moral philosophy.

Before I present various ethical theories in my classes, I discuss several metaethical topics: the nature of ethical knowledge; challenges to the prospects for such knowledge (in Hume's and Moore's arguments); and such positions as conventionalism, naturalism, intuitionism, subjectivism, objectivism, and rationalism.

If metaethics tries to answer the question, "Is there moral knowledge and if so what kind of knowledge is it?" ethics tries to answer the question, "How ought we to act?" As I teach the course, among the various answers, including Socratic, Aristotelian, Thomist, Spinozist, and Kantian, as well as utilitarian, altruist, egoist, and so forth, Rand's ethical egoism is presented as one of the serious contenders.

Preliminaries to Teaching Rand's Ethics

I start my discussion of egoism as it is usually presented in ethics textbooks, and then I indicate some problems with it (e.g., it arises from what was actually a kind of psychological egoism, namely, that of Thomas Hobbes). Hobbes is usually mentioned as the quintessen-

tial egoist, although Butler is also mentioned now and then. Once in a rare while, one finds references to Max Stirner, too, as the most extreme form of subjective egoist. In more advanced treatments, Jessie Kalen and Eric Mack are also discussed. Some books even make reference to my version of this position, which I have called Classical Egoism (or Individualism).

The view that many ethics text authors consider the typically ethical egoist position may be summarized as follows: Everyone ought to pursue his or her self-interest. Self-interest, in turn, is what a person believes will most effectively achieve the fulfillment of his or her desires. (Desires, themselves, aren't subject to evaluation—they are, in effect, the standards of good and bad for everyone.) In Hobbes, what we get is not actually a bona fide ethics but a theory or account of human motivation (in the state of nature). Hobbesian individuals have the natural right to effectuate their will or desires. (Here it is not Lockean freedom rights that are at issue but what might be called power-rights.) They are pursuing their self-interest or behave so as to preserve themselves and this is part of their nature, what they can be expected to do, just as a cat is expected to chase mice or a cheetah antelopes.

So the original Hobbesian position is not in fact about what anyone in the state of nature ought to do or ought to avoid doing. What Hobbes held is that everyone in fact will do this. The idea derives from Hobbes' mechanistic materialist position, inspired by his admiration for Galileo: All matter strives to keep in motion and that includes the human being. Self-preservation or seeking one's self-interest is but the application of the most basic law of physics to living beings.

We have here, then, a form of psychological egoism. At the hands of many authors of ethics texts, this view is reshaped into a subjectivist ethical egoism: What Hobbes states we will in fact do is changed to what we ought to do, namely, satisfy our desires. Thus, for example, James Rachels has rendered ethical egoism as follows: "Of course it is possible for people to act altruistically, and perhaps many people do act that way but there is no reason why they should do so. A person is under no obligation to do anything except what

is in his own interest." So far so good, since "what is his own interest" is left unspecified. But then Rachels says: "Suppose I have an urge to set fire to some public building (say, a department store) just for the fascination of watching the spectacular blaze: according to this view, the fact that several people might be burned to death provides no reason whatever why I should not do it" (Rachels 1971, 14). This, of course, is a rather convoluted way of rendering ethical egoism but it shows that, in the process of transformation, the Hobbesian idea that self-interest amounts to self-preservation is also abandoned. Instead, the pursuit of one's self-interest, even one's rational self-interest, is rendered as "Do whatever you like!"

Now Rachels acknowledges that some "would point out that it is really not to my own advantage to set the fire—for if I do that I may be caught and put into prison (unlike Gyges, I have no magic ring for protection)." He adds:

Moreover, even if I could avoid being caught, it is still to my advantage to respect the rights and interests of others, for it is to my advantage to live in a society in which people's rights and interests are respected. Only in such a society can I live a happy and secure life; so, in acting kindly toward others, I would merely be doing my part to create and maintain the sort of society which it is to my advantage to have. (14)

In other words, rational egoism is seen as a requirement that one secures for one's long-run interests. To this, Rachels replies by noting:

But there is no reason for the egoist to think that merely because he will not honor the rules of the social game, decent society will collapse. For the vast majority of people are not egoists, and there is no reason to think that they will be converted by this example—especially if he is discrete and does not unduly flaunt his style of life. What this line of reasoning shows is not that the egoist himself must act

benevolently, but that he must encourage others to do so.
(14)

Many others, of course, find fault with the Hobbesian story as well as the changed version of it that becomes the kind of ethical egoism that Rachels has in mind. And, as in the case of Rachels, nearly all the arguments against selfishness, self-interest, self-centeredness, self-indulgence, cruelty to others, even egotism, actually target this neo-Hobbesian position, not the sort we might find in Butler, let alone Aristotle or Rand. Critics note that the neo-Hobbesian position flies in the face of our considered moral judgments, our intuitions, our commonsense understanding of the nature of morality, and the like. Some of this is question-begging, even against the neo-Hobbesian position. For example, why should intuitions, considered moral judgments and such be accepted as dependable or sound benchmarks as to what a moral system should say?

Yet, it is also true that there are some fatal problems in the subjectivist egoist stance. Its fundamental tenet cannot be universalized. Nor can it function as an action-guiding principle or virtue for human beings within their nearly all-pervasive community lives. Only hermits could act by subjectivist egoist standards but even they would find it impossible to decide what to do when they are motivated by several equally powerful desires.

Some of what we see in Rachels' rendition of the more developed ethical egoism may appear to capture Ayn Rand's Objectivist ethics. But this is a mistake. Instead, her version of ethical egoism rests on what is suggested, in a rudimentary fashion, by some points Plato makes about concern for one's true interest and points Aristotle makes about the self-love of a just person. I say this is only suggestive because there are immediate problems with both views. Plato's conception of the human self is dualistic through and through, which leaves much about ethics and life in general mysterious. In Aristotle, it is the just individual who ought to love himself, yet what makes the just man just may have nothing at all to do with benefitting oneself.

But what these thinkers have in common with Rand is that they approach ethics based on human nature, on what are the essential or

fundamental attributes proper to a human individual. And the way to act for each individual is constitutive of that individual's human good, not merely an optional instrument to achieve some end state that he considers of benefit to himself. In contrast, Rachels, as we have seen, speculates on the motives of human beings and the results of acting on such motives quite independently of human nature. This is why he can characterize ethical egoism as nothing but a Machiavelian system of strategies by which individuals pursue whatever they like, never mind what is objectively good for them.

So, in contrast to how Rachels sees ethics, in the ancient Greek tradition of moral philosophy, there are ideas that are precursors to Rand's Objectivist (naturalist) understanding of ethics. Both Plato and Aristotle, after all, construe the virtuous life as one that makes the agent excellent as the kind of being that he or she is. The excellence of something is, of course, the best thing for that thing, so that these views are versions of egoism and are not implausible.²

Some Metaethical Preparations for Randian Egoism

In presenting Rand's approach to the class, I observe that she begins her investigations into ethics by noting: "The first question that has to be answered, as a precondition of any attempt to define, to judge or to accept any specific system of ethics, is: 'Why does man need a code of values?'" (Rand 1964, 13). She adds: "In ethics, one must begin by asking: What are *values*? Why does man need them?" (15). For Rand, ethics exists so as to guide us to a successful life as human individuals.

What . . . are the right goals for man to pursue? What are the values his survival requires? That is the question to be answered by the science of *ethics*. And *this . . .* is why man needs a code of ethics. . . . Ethics is an *objective, metaphysical necessity of man's survival*—not by the grace of the supernatural nor of your neighbor nor of your whims, but by the grace of reality and the nature of life. (22–23)

If it is true that the nature of human life is such that values are indispensable, this will establish that values have a cognitive status, just as they do in, for example, the more specialized sciences of nutrition or medicine. Both of these disciplines deal with values. When a diet or medication is prescribed, these prescriptions are grounded in facts, including the fact that some things are better for people's well-being than others. So in these fields it is understood that one can discover what values are, what is good and what is bad for people's physical health. Rand argues that the same is true when it comes to their overall well-being. Of course, this presupposes that living as a human being is what consistent actions are aimed at, just as medical values presuppose that health is what consistent medical actions are aimed at.

But Rand would respond to those who consider this a kind of subjectivism—one might have chosen something other than living, after all—that ethics is irrelevant to those who chose death. “The standard of value of the Objectivist ethics—the standard by which one judges what is good or evil—is *man's life*, or: that which is required for man's survival *qua man*” (23). And, to quote Rand's protagonist John Galt, who speaks for her on these and other matters: “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” (15). Which is to say that for human beings who must make choices to guide themselves, the basic choice is to live or not to live, to exist or not to exist. Once that choice to live is made, consistency demands that they judge and conduct themselves by the right code of ethics for the kind of living entities that they are: rational animals.

So Rand proceeded in ethics from a metaethical cognitivism, that was not formally deductivist but conceptually inferential. She drew on theories and definitions that are sound beyond a reasonable doubt, concluding with the best answers to the relevant question, “How should I act?”—that is, in what has come to be called the field of ethics or morality.

This is not all that different from engineering. There are general principles of engineering sciences and then there are particular cases

for which these principles are employed to guide—how to build bridges, hotels or gas stations and so on. The reasoning is never purely deductive, although once a sound definition or theory is at hand, one can deduce, with the aid of appropriate additional premises, ethical or political conclusions. It is always inferential. It is always conceptually developed, moving from a concept to a next concept to see whether this is the most economically sensible way to account for the environment of the phenomena around you. Here is Rand's major argument in which this emerges clearly:

Metaphysically, *life* is the only phenomenon that is an end in itself: a value gained and kept by a constant process of action. Epistemologically, the concept of “value” is genetically dependent upon and derived from the antecedent concept of “life.” To speak of “value” as apart from “life” is worse than a contradiction in terms. “It is only the concept of ‘Life’ that makes the concept of ‘Value’ possible.”³ (17)

Rand holds that values and moral values are objective—neither intrinsic, so that the goodness of something lies within it, independent of how it relates to something else—or subjective, so that the goodness is imparted to it by one's desiring it. As Rand (1967, 22) puts it:

The *objective* theory holds that the good is neither an attribute of “things in themselves” nor of man's emotional states, but *an evaluation* of the facts of reality by man's consciousness according to a rational standard of value. (Rational, in this context, means: derived from the facts of reality and validated by a process of reason.) The objective theory holds that *the good is an aspect of reality in relation to man*—and that it must be discovered, not invented, by man. Fundamental to an objective theory of values is the question: Of value to whom and for what?

The point that the good must be discovered is crucial—it is part and parcel of its being good (for one) that it is discovered to be so by one, ergo attempts to force the good upon those not willing to embrace it are inherently impossible. “The objective theory of values is the only moral theory incompatible with rule by force” (23). So these are the basics of Randian metaethics.

Rational Egoism

In teaching this theory, I then turn to some finer points of Rand’s ethical egoism (or individualism). Rand basically answers the question, “How should I act?” by reference first and foremost to one’s human nature. “How should I (a human individual) act?” And she believes, in my view, that “should” amounts to: “What would make me a better person given the variety of options available to me?”

This is why hers is a naturalistic ethics. It requires some understanding of human nature. The reason Rand then identifies thinking as the good-making virtue—as the virtue that is central to human living—is that human beings are presumably distinguished in nature by their capacity and dependence upon reasoning.⁴

Now the famous Randian ethical egoism here is simple: you—your self or ego—get better and better by means of your agency if and only if you act in accord with your nature. That is the gist of Rand’s egoism. Notice that this is not the kind of egoism that is mostly taught in elementary ethics courses where egoism means: do anything that damned well happens to please you. That is a form of egoism that does not even exist in the history of philosophy. It exists in a crude type of psychology—because of its and other social sciences’ scientism—but nobody really advocates it as an ethics. As I have noted before, I call Rand’s version a classical egoism or individualism. It is not the doctrine that everybody is always selfish. It is not the doctrine that says: “Do whatever you want to do.” It is the doctrine that the way to become good at human life is to be a thinking, reasoning, attention-paying person.

After having laid out something along these lines, I consider

some objections to Rand’s egoism. I explore James Rachels’ arguments, as well as those of several others. (In these instances, I draw from Machan 1979.) I consider difficulties about identifying human nature. I consider just what is properly meant by “self”—is it the actual identity of someone or one’s most coherent, consistent, complete identity? I consider difficulties with the idea of “the choice to think” and whether, as Rasmussen and Den Uyl have urged, morality must involve the value of life independently of whether one chooses to live one’s life.

I also consider standard arguments against other types of ethical egoism and whether they should worry Rand—such as whether advocating egoism might be non-egoistic, even altruistic. I discuss the fact that Rand is at times charged with not being egoistic—or individualistic—enough because she insists that one’s coercion of others, for the sake of gaining benefits, is unjustified. (In this context, I consider Eric Mack’s view that Rand’s egoism may not suffice to support her theory of individual rights.) I also explore whether Rand is not too much of an act-egoist, that is to say, one who believes that each human being figures out whether a specific action will result in an overall advantage vis-a-vis other actions that he or she might take. What we might call virtue or rule-egoism holds, by contrast, that everyone ought to live by certain principles that will guide one to a life of overall advantage, benefit, excellence or flourishing.

David Kelley, in rendering Rand’s view, says that “[a] commitment to one’s own life and happiness . . . is a full-time job. Any action not serving that end is at least a mild form of self-sacrifice, a use of our time and effort for things that do not benefit us, or that provide a lesser benefit than we might obtain by other uses of our resources” (Kelley 1996, 7). He also writes: “Objectivism holds that the agent should be the ultimate intended beneficiary of his own actions, helping others only when their good is a means to his own, or an ingredient in it (a constitutive means), as in a close personal relationship.”⁵

I close my discussion of Rand’s egoism by challenging the universality of some of the virtues that she champions (e.g., produc-

tivity, for someone who is born very fortunate, or prudence for someone who is very adventurous). I do not end my class discussion of Rand's Objectivist ethics by rendering a verdict that I may have reached on these matters. I simply present her views as well as I can and raise some objections, back and forth, as time permits. Then students can proceed to consider the merits of the position on their own.

Many of my students have chosen to do their papers on Rand and they often find her position promising. In some cases, this is transparently brown-nosing, while in others, they make a good case.

Notes

1. This paper was delivered at the Ayn Rand Society meeting (Eastern division, American Philosophical Association) in Boston, Massachusetts on 30 December 1999. Some of the material in the essay draws from "Rand's Moral Philosophy," Chapter 3 of Machan 1999.

2. That is what leads Hardie (1965) to construe Aristotle as an ethical egoist.

3. Compare with Popper 1974, 194: "I think that values enter the world with life; and if there is life without consciousness (as I think there may well be, even in animals and man, for there appears to be such a thing as dreamless sleep) then, I suggest, there will also be objective values, even without consciousness."

4. It is worth noting here that Rand's secular naturalism has been subjected to much disdain, even ridicule, mainly because of the prominence of either secular conventionalism or theological naturalism. Her realism about natures—as evident in her discussion of definitions and what they are about ("definition[s] must identify the nature of the units, i.e., the essential characteristics without which the units would not be the kind of existents they are") in her *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* (1990, 42)—is now echoed in what has come to be called the "naturalized epistemology" movement. See, for example, Kornblith 1993.

5. This way of understanding ethical egoism influences Kelley's discussion of the benevolent virtues. "When I treat others benevolently, I convey to them that I do not see them as threats or as prey, whose success must come at my expense, but as potential allies from whom I seek opportunities for mutual gain."

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