

Centenary Symposium, Part II
Ayn Rand Among the Austrians

Discussion

Reply to William Thomas, “An Economist Reads Philosophy” (Spring 2004)

An Economist Responds

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I thank William Thomas (2004) for a review of my book, *Ethics as Social Science: The Moral Philosophy of Social Cooperation*, which I take to be favorable on the whole. Responding to the opportunity to restate and amplify (or even modify) what I wrote, I understandably will pay more attention to possible disagreements than to the larger areas of agreement between Thomas and me.

Thomas says that I am vague. I leave it “unclear” how happiness and social cooperation, the ultimate and penultimate criteria of goodness, “work together” (403). On what is meant to yield a moral code, I am “somewhat sketchy with the specifics.” I am “content to accept happiness as a somewhat fuzzy, intuitively-known state” (406).

Remarks like this sting if they refer to my writing style. I work hard on being clear and would be distressed to learn that I fail. I work on splitting up the long and complicated sentences that admittedly do infect my early drafts. I try to replace long or obscure words when simple words serve just as well.

But perhaps the charge refers to my positions. I supposedly do not draw a sharp enough line between real and spurious rights. Thomas uses a slippery-slope argument against my answer to Loren Lomasky’s question whether a small child drowning in a swimming pool has a right to be rescued by an able-bodied adult on the scene. I might have given the flat “no” that Thomas evidently wants by construing the word “right” more narrowly than is done in ordinary discourse. As ordinarily understood, “one person’s right is his

entitlement to behavior toward him by other persons that binds those others with a special degree of moral force, and often with legal force” (Yeager 2001, 215). Rights arise within ethics, and degrees of moral obligation do vary according to circumstances. The obligation to refrain from murder is stronger than the obligation to avoid gratuitously insulting one’s friends. Recognizing the adult’s strong moral obligation in the temporary special situation postulated by Lomasky does not put me on a slippery slope toward recognizing all sorts of supposed positive or welfare rights. On these, I quite agree with the Objectivists.

I am said to be “somewhat sketchy with the specifics” about what is meant to yield a moral code. That charge might mean that I do not lay out the way to a detailed and nearly exhaustive code. I do not specify whether the death penalty is ever justified and, if it is, in what specific circumstances. But this omission flows from the nature of the case. With regard to specific applications, ethics, like science, is a field of ongoing investigation.

The charge of vagueness and sketchiness apparently covers a complaint that my positive case for indirect utilitarianism is rather concise. Perhaps it is; but as I see it (and present it in Yeager 2001, Chapter 4), the *grounding* of ethics is indeed straightforward. I am said to spend “more time describing interesting or prominent philosophic arguments” than developing my own positions (Thomas 2004, 404). But I believe I amplify my positive argument by dealing with the many misconceptions about utilitarianism and charges against it that are in circulation.

“Yeager simply refuses to be driven to extreme positions, even when the facts lead there. . . . Yeager is prone to splitting the difference between contradictory doctrines” (405). But I emphatically do not think that splitting the difference yields truth. I am as critical as anyone of the pernicious notion that a middle ground between extremes is meritorious in itself. I urge great respect for principles, but I do not insist on their unswerving application, regardless of circumstances or possible clashes with other principles. I also write: “Here, as in other matters that economists deal with, a reasonable position may fall between conceivable extremes—but to say so is not

to recommend a mindless middle-of-the-road stance” (Yeager 2001, 4). This rejection of insipid compromise is especially important in science and scholarship (whatever may often be true in practical politics).

Sometimes what may superficially appear to be such a compromise is a distinct position correct on its own grounds. Situations are familiar in which “unquestionably yes” or “certainly not”—“all” or “none”—is the wrong answer. Should you avoid eating because you might eat too much and fatten yourself into an early grave? Should you avoid ever switching on the TV because you might become addicted to goofing off? Recent scientific research supports the old proposition that what is ordinarily a poison may actually benefit an organism in low doses (Begley 2003). Economics often, though not always, tells against all-or-nothing (“corner”) solutions. Marginalism is one of its chief lessons.

I allegedly convey the impression “that pretty much all utilitarianism has been of the sensible, contextual, ‘rules’ variety; that its antipode, ‘act’ utilitarianism, is a straw-man position invented by critics . . . and . . . that nothing is more simple than to derive classical liberalism from utilitarian conceptions of social cooperation . . .” (Thomas 2004, 404–5). But I did not even hint at having counted the adherents of each strand of doctrine. The act utilitarianism of familiar caricatures like those I cite has indeed become scarcely more than a strawman nowadays, whether or not some benighted souls might once have espoused it. As for deriving classical liberalism, Thomas must know that I, like he, could name many simpler tasks.

Thomas expresses pleasure at my apparently “exhaustive acquaintance with the Objectivist literature” (405). Among Objectivists whose writings I touch upon, he lists Tara Smith. I must confess that I had *not* been acquainted with her writings, but I did hasten to check out and read her only book in the Auburn University library, *Moral Rights and Political Freedom*. Smith insists that her “teleological” approach differs from indirect utilitarianism (or “indirect consequentialism,” as she says, consequentialism being the set of doctrines whose most prominent members are versions of utilitarianism). She does not, however, make the asserted difference

clear. For her as for me, the highest good or value is what she calls life, the good life, well-being, *eudaimonia*, or happiness; she explicitly says that she uses these terms interchangeably (e.g., Smith 1995, 80 n. 4). If I deal fuzzily, as Thomas says, with the thus-multi-labeled concept, Smith puts me in good company. She and I differ little in substance, although differing somewhat in terminology and writing style and mainly in emphasis. In particular, she neither emphasizes nor depreciates social cooperation. Esteem for social cooperation (without use of the specific term) is evident in Rand's novels and in her exaltation of the "trader" (as distinguished from the "looter" and the "moocher").

In at least one place in his review, Thomas (2004, 407) seems suspicious of how I use the term "social cooperation." The way I use it has become almost standard among writers on ethics whom I admire. As I repeat, perhaps excessively, it means a well-functioning society, a framework of laws, customs, institutions, attitudes, and so forth that are conducive to individuals' mutually beneficial interactions with one another as they seek to make good lives for themselves. No lengthy disquisition is required to show why such a framework is almost essential to individuals' good lives, or happiness. I obviously do not understand social cooperation as "being cooperative," obsessively subordinating one's own goals and judgments to those of other people, "going along to get along." I have been enough influenced by Ayn Rand to scorn cooperation misinterpreted as secondhandism or as groupthink (Yeager 1997; 2000).

I appreciate Thomas's conclusion that I have given readers "a sense of how a wide range of philosophical and social science research programs converge to support a liberal, eudaimonistic ethical/political system, one that, in outline, has much in common with Ayn Rand's ethical vision" (Thomas 2004, 408).

References

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