

## Regarding Choice and the Foundation of Morality: Reflections on Rand's Ethics

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Reason . . . is the fountain and headspring of all mischiefs. For reason feareth not God, it loveth not God, it trusteth not in God, but proudly contemneth Him. It is not moved either with his threatenings or his promises. It is not delighted with his words or works, but it murmureth against him, it is angry with him, judgeth and hateth him; to be short, "it is an enemy to God," Rom. 8 [7], not giving him his glory. This pestilent beast (reason I say) being once slain, all outward and gross sins should be nothing.

— Martin Luther "Commentary on Galatians" (in Luther 1961, 128)

Ayn Rand's philosophy is Aristotelianism without Platonism.

— Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (Peikoff 1991, 459)

This essay seeks to discuss aspects of Rand's view of human nature with an eye toward a single, but profound, issue: the relationship between human choice and what is good.<sup>1</sup> In developing this issue, I will use material from Roderick T. Long's excellent monograph, *Reason and Value: Aristotle versus Rand* (Long 2000), and respond to Tibor R. Machan's challenging essay, "Rand and Choice" (Machan 2006). My aim will be to show just how vital Aristotelianism, or at least a contemporary version of it, is to the plausibility of Rand's views. As Douglas J. Den Uyl and I noted in *The Philosophic Thought of Ayn Rand*, her views really only make sense when they are seen as advancing "the Aristotelian alternative" (Den Uyl and Rasmussen 1984, 10). Furthermore, I will argue that there is a basic confusion of

the conceptual and the real orders by those who see morality as resting on the so-called premoral choice to live.

### **The “Official Doctrine”**

Let us begin by considering some statements from Leonard Peikoff:

If life is what you *want*, you must pay for *it*, by accepting and practicing a code of rational behavior. Morality, too, is a must-*if*; it is the price of the choice to live. *That choice itself, therefore, is not a moral choice; it precedes morality; it is the decision of consciousness that underlies the need of morality.* (Peikoff 1991, 244–45; emphasis added)

A few pages later, however, Peikoff states that according to Objectivism one who chooses not to live “would belong on the lowest rung of hell . . . [and] would *have to be* condemned by any human being as a monster” (248; emphasis added). Peikoff thus insists that the choice to live is not arbitrary or groundless and that one can make evaluations about people who choose not to live.

Now, it does not take a rocket scientist to realize that saying that someone who chooses not to live “belongs on the lowest rung of hell” or “would have to be condemned as a monster” are severe moral condemnations. Thus, it seems most natural and quite logical, to ask: If the choice to live precedes morality, then how is it possible to condemn morally the choice not to live? Alternatively, how is it possible to praise morally the choice to live? Indeed, this very problem is a point that Long has clearly described. He states that Rand’s “official doctrine” seems to be that the value of one’s ultimate good, one’s life as a flourishing rational animal,

depends on its being chosen: once a person chooses to live, he is committed to valuing the means to this end, including the correct moral code. But since these values presuppose that one has chosen to live, the basic choice is not, it would

seem, subject to moral appraisal. Now Rand is perhaps not consistent on this point. Her rather contemptuous language [see Rand 1957, 1015<sup>2</sup>] suggests that she is in fact prepared to pass moral judgment on those who choose not to live. But her official doctrine, as I read it, is that moral considerations come into play only as a result of the choice to live. It is difficult to avoid the implication—though Rand wishes to—that the choice to live is arbitrary, a groundless, subjective, existentialist commitment for or against which rationality has nothing to say. The role of practical reason, it would seem, is limited to assessing the means to the ultimate end, one’s life, once it is chosen. But that role does not extend to the evaluation of the end itself. The picture, *mutatis mutandis*, is pure Hume. (Long 2000, 34)

This evaluation is also one that is shared by others: Eric Mack (2003), Douglas J. Den Uyl, and myself. Moreover, in my recent contribution to this discussion, I also characterized this “official doctrine” as voluntarist, which I described as the idea that “something is obligatory only if we choose it” (Rasmussen 2002, 81). I am going to have more to say about the implications for Rand’s philosophy of embracing voluntarism at the very end of this essay, but there is another important observation made by Long that needs to be put on the table. It has to do with three different ways of understanding a basic ethical imperative. They are:

*Categorical imperative*—regardless of what ends you seek, you must take the following steps. *Problematic hypothetical imperative*—if you seek this end, then you must take the following steps. *Assertoric hypothetical imperative*—since you seek this end, then you must take the following steps.<sup>3</sup> (Long 2000, 61 n. 65; emphasis added)

Long holds that Rand clearly rejects a categorical interpretation of fundamental ethical imperatives but that her “official doctrine” accepts the problematic hypothetical interpretation. He also notes

that there are times in which she talks as if she holds the assertoric hypothetical interpretation, which he labels correctly as “Aristotelian” (34). Thus, the issue for those interested in using and defending Rand’s ethics is this: Which interpretation of basic ethical imperatives gives her ethics the best chance of being true?<sup>4</sup>

### **The Neo-Aristotelian View**

According to this Aristotelian view, one’s life as a flourishing rational animal is one’s ultimate good or end. This ultimate good or end is, as Long puts it, “not a matter of choice [but] is implicit in every desire or choice . . . . The end is, as it were, forced upon us, and the task of practical reason is simply to identify it” (34). What Long means by this is that all human beings have an inherent potentiality for their mature state—for their flourishing or self-perfection or good—and though this potentiality is only achieved by and through their choice, their having this potentiality for this mature state is not itself a matter of choice. It is thus within this context, within a particular account of human nature, that human choice is understood.

Individual human beings have the power to choose: to initiate or direct, at least to some extent, their cognition and conduct.<sup>5</sup> This power is not reducible to some chain of efficient causes. It is not the mere result of antecedent sociocultural forces or genetic factors. Rather, it is a type of causality that human beings exhibit. This power is causally primary and is an expression of the type of agent a human being is. For the Aristotelian, as for Rand, causality is a manifestation of the nature of a thing, and so human choice must be understood in terms of human nature. Yet, this also means that human choice is not a primitive, inexplicable, unconditional act. It is not radically free, able to create its own context of operation. It is instead a power that belongs to a certain type or kind of animal. So, though human beings are certainly free not to actualize their inherent potentiality for maturation, they are also not free to change the fact that they have this potentiality in virtue of the type or kind of living thing they are. They are not free, in other words, to change what they are.<sup>6</sup>

It is here that we find the primary difference between the

Aristotelian, or at least neo-Aristotelian, view of human choice and the “official doctrine.” For the neo-Aristotelian, human choice is not simply the use of a capacity that operates separately from and unconnected with the rest of human nature. Rather, human choice is the exercise of a power that belongs to a set of powers that makes human beings living organisms, and as such, the functioning of human choice has to be understood in terms of the fundamental and overall potentiality that living organisms have for their maturation. More specifically, human choice has to be understood in terms of a human being’s inherent potentiality for his or her mature state. In other words, the mature state of a human being—an individual’s self-perfection or good—is the natural end or *telos* of human choice.<sup>7</sup> Human choice thus has a function or end in virtue of what a human being *is*.

The “official doctrine” rejects the idea that human choice has some ultimate end that is not first chosen. The function of human choice is dictated by human choice. Something is an end only if it is chosen and never is it the case that choices exist because there is an ultimate end or good—something that choice is ultimately naturally *for*. The basic assumption behind this view is that all nonmental causation must be material and efficient, with no place for either formal or final causation. This assumption betrays a bewitchment by the Cartesian paradigm of a lifeless physical world in which the only way that end-oriented behavior can enter it is by introducing the mental as an ontological category—a special realm that operates apart from physical things. There is, however, no good reason to view the physical world as lifeless or to think of the powers of reasoning and choosing as operating in some realm of human nature separated from living powers. Indeed, Rand rejects such a view. Yet, it seems then that in their desire to make human choice causally efficacious the advocates of the “official doctrine” have forgotten the biocentric context in which human choice operates.

The neo-Aristotelian view is, of course, the interpretation of Rand that Den Uyl and I advocate, and though it is a view that rejects “categorical duties,” it accepts living as a flourishing rational animal as, what Mack (2003, 61 n. 15) perspicaciously terms, a “categorical

end.” It is an end that is worth promoting for its own sake and whose value is not derived from its being merely desired or chosen but because of what it is.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, human flourishing is not only a categorical end, it is *the* categorical end, because it is in Rand’s terms “that which makes possible” all other ends. Thus, when it comes to determining what one ought to do, it will be in terms of this categorical end that one will discover the goods and virtues that need to be achieved and expressed in one’s conduct. One’s obligations, then, are the result of an assertoric hypothetical imperative.<sup>9</sup> They result from the facts about human nature—namely, living one’s life as a flourishing rational animal is one’s *telos* and such a way of life comprises activities that are good for a human being and are thus choice-worthy. Obligations are, then, expressive of the activities that constitute the flourishing life. The obligatory and the good are merely distinct ways of viewing the same activity, not separate categories of morality.<sup>10</sup> As a result, one does not need to choose to live or flourish<sup>11</sup> in order for there to be ethical obligations; they result from the facts that pertain to one as the type of living thing one is. There is no such thing as the *pre-moral* choice to live or flourish because the choice to live or not, like all other choices, can be judged in terms of this categorical end.

### **Objections to the Neo-Aristotelian View**

Machan (2006, 265) has charged that the neo-Aristotelian view of choice and the foundation of morality just sketched is a version of the Platonic tendency to treat that which is good or valuable as something *intrinsic*—namely, the tendency to treat the good or valuable as existing “out there” as an independent fact of reality apart from human choices. Before responding to this charge, there are some distinctions to be made: First, when we say that what is good or valuable exists, are we talking of it existing as a potentiality or an actuality? Second, when we say that something only exists in relation to human beings, are we talking about a relation that is dependent on human cognition and effort or a relation that exists independent of such cognition and effort? Third, when we talk about what is good or valuable, are we talking about these as conceptualized or as realities? We will consider

these first two distinctions now and leave the third for later.

First, the neo-Aristotelian view holds that human flourishing exists as a *potentiality* for human beings regardless of whether it is chosen or not, but it does not hold that human flourishing exists as an *actuality* apart from its being chosen and achieved. Second, the neo-Aristotelian view holds that human flourishing neither exists nor is what it is as the *telos* of human choice apart from its relationship to human beings, but it does not hold that such a relationship only exists when it is known or chosen. Hence, the neo-Aristotelian view would seem not to be guilty of intrinsicism in the sense of treating that which is morally good and valuable as something that exists or is what it is independent of human beings. It is not some kind of reality that exists in splendid isolation, separate and apart from human beings. It is relational.

Yet, since the neo-Aristotelian view does hold that human flourishing is the *telos* for human beings and that it exists as a potentiality independent of its being known or chosen, it might still seem that this is intrinsicism after all. What is crucial to this version of the intrinsicist complaint is the assumption that if our nature provides us any guidance—in other words, if what is ultimately good for us as human beings has directive power for our choices as something to which we are naturally drawn—then we are somehow compelled and no longer free or moral beings. Yet, this assumption betrays, as noted before, an acceptance of the Cartesian paradigm that there is no middle ground between compulsion and radical freedom—in effect, that human beings are not teleological beings—and it ignores what may be Rand's fundamental contribution to contemporary metaethics—namely, the fundamentally biocentric character of basic ends and values (*cf.* Foot 2001, 26–27).

There is, however, no good reason to view the world this way, and this is especially so for anyone who seeks to understand Rand's contribution to philosophy. She is an Aristotelian who is challenging the mind-body dichotomy.

Machan (2006, 265) also charges that there is a failure on the part of neo-Aristotelians to recognize the fundamentality of the choice to live and that they mistakenly treat this choice like merely one choice

among others. Rather, he insists that the choice to live is basic. It is implicit in all other choices. Yet, how are we to understand the idea that the choice to live is implicit in all other choices? What is it that makes the choice to live implicit in all other choices? What makes the choice to live basic? It is the object of the choice to live—namely, life—that makes this choice basic; for if it were just the choosing itself, then there would be nothing by which to differentiate this choice from another choice. Yet, if it is life that makes the choice to live fundamental and implicit in all other choices, then this is but another way of saying that the end or value of life is implicit in any choice one makes.

But as I asked in “Rand on Obligation and Value,” what does it mean to say that the end or value of life is implicit in any choice a person makes? If it means that one cannot choose or value anything—even not living—without valuing that which makes such choosing or valuation possible,<sup>12</sup> then what is being contended is that all choosing or valuing involves choosing or valuing that which makes choosing or valuing possible, and this is the end or value of life. Thus, as Nathaniel Branden (1962, 26) once put it, “not to hold man’s life as one’s standard for moral judgment is to be guilty of a *logical contradiction*.” Yet, what difference would this assessment make to a person who chooses not to live? The answer to this question depends, of course, on whether being guilty of a logical contradiction carries with it an obligation to change the choices, beliefs, and conduct in which the contradiction is manifested. How is “logical” to be interpreted? Is logic something purely formal and unrelated to human living or is it primarily a tool (an *organon*) whose end is knowledge and thus is ultimately for the sake of human flourishing?

If, on the one hand, being guilty of a contradiction is only a purely formal logical assessment and is separated from any claim about the end or purpose of logical decisions and choices—that is to say, if it makes no claim about human nature, particularly, if it does not acknowledge that these choices and decisions are for knowledge and are thus, like all other human choices and powers, to be understood in terms of a human being’s fundamental potentiality for maturation—then though a person who chooses not to live is indeed guilty of an

inconsistency and is as a matter of logic irrational, this charge does not as such have any purchase on a person's choices (Rasmussen 2002, 71–74). By refusing to acknowledge that all human choice and decision, even those of logic, are ultimately for the sake of human flourishing, the purely formal interpretation of “logical” bifurcates human nature at its core. It separates knowledge from conduct, and reason from desire. It offers no connection between human reason and motivation for conduct.

Indeed, as noted in “Rand on Obligation and Value,” what moral punch does being accused of irrationality have if it is assumed, as the “official doctrine” does, that there are no unchosen obligations? If obligations are possible only on the condition of having chosen to live, then how is being guilty of a contradiction supposed to make any difference to the person who chooses not to live? What would be the basis for saying to one who has chosen not to live that one ought to refrain from contradicting oneself in one's thoughts and actions? Without the acknowledgments that life is the natural end or *telos* of human life and choice and that logic serves this end as the central instrument or tool for knowledge, then there is a separation of the logical “ought” from the moral “ought,” and to try to use a logical reason as a basis for determining a practical reason is to commit a version of the naturalistic fallacy. Logic alone, separated from its natural function, cannot suffice.

If, on the other hand, the claim that the end or value of life is implicit in any choice is interpreted as holding that the end or value of life is implicit in any choice as, what Machan (2006, 260) calls in passing, the “proper end,” then it seems that one is invoking the idea that human choice has an inherent potentiality for life of a certain sort, which is the ultimate end and value, and that it is in terms of that end that choice is evaluated, including the choice to live or not to live. Thus, being guilty of a contradiction would carry with it the obligation to change the choices, beliefs, and conduct in which the contradiction is manifested. Consequently, either the “official doctrine” cannot avoid the charge that it makes ethical obligations ultimately a matter of sheer commitment or it ends up, despite claims to the contrary, endorsing the neo-Aristotelian view in which living as a flourishing

rational animal is the *telos* of human conduct.

## A Middle Ground?

Possibly, I am moving too quickly here. Is there a middle ground between these alternatives? In a recent paper, “Ayn Rand as Aristotelian: Values and Happiness,” Fred D. Miller, Jr. (2005) argues that the account of ethical imperatives given in Rand’s “Causality Versus Duty” (in Rand 1982) does not require that the choice to live be arbitrary or irrational. Miller (2005, 12) argues that though the choice of life or death is ultimately up to us, “the only rational choice is the choice to live” and “this claim depends on the . . . argument in ‘The Objectivist Ethics’ that all values depend ultimately on an ultimate value, and ‘life is the only phenomenon that is an end in itself.’”<sup>13</sup> So, could this approach be the basis for a middle position? The answer to this question depends on the answers to two other questions: What does “rational” mean here, and is a rational choice a moral choice? It certainly seems that Miller is not using “rational” in a mere instrumental sense. Rather, he is using it in a substantive sense—that is, as it concerns the choice of ultimate ends—and he holds that the choice to live is the rational one as determined by what is the ultimate end or value for a human being. It also certainly seems that a rational choice in the substantive sense is a moral choice. Though some choices are certainly more morally important than others, there is no special realm of moral choices. Moral choices are not acontextual or unconditional. They are made regarding something at some time and some place, and there is no good reason for construing them as existing apart from, or as being anything other than, the choices of human beings taking on the task of living. We are after all considering the ethical views of Rand and Aristotle, not Kant. Thus, it does not seem that Miller offers a basis for a middle position.

Nevertheless, he does suggest a point that I made in “Rand on Obligation and Value” that is worthwhile to note when it comes to interpreting Rand—namely, she does *not* say in “Causality Versus Duty” that if you do not choose to live (or if you choose not to live),<sup>14</sup> then a rational ethics will not tell you what principles to follow or that

they do not apply to the choice to live. She rather simply says that “nature will take its course.” She never says or implies that a premoral choice to live is necessary for moral obligations to exist.<sup>15</sup> So, despite the “official doctrine,” and what its defenders have argued, there is no necessary conflict between the neo-Aristotelian view and what Rand states in “Causality Versus Duty.”

## The Choice to Think

While in the process of explaining the fundamental nature of the choice to live, Machan (2006, 266) changes the terms of the debate. He notes that it is impossible to understand the choice to live as something deliberately or self-consciously done, because such states of awareness presuppose “the choice to think,” or to conceptually engage the world, and so the choice to think must be seen as the flip-side of the choice to live. Indeed, in *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand states:

No, you do not have to live; it is your basic act of choice; but if you choose to live, you must live as a man—by the work and judgment of your mind.

No, you do not have to live as a man; it is an act of moral choice. But you cannot live as anything else—and the alternative is the state of living death which you now see within and around you, the state of a thing unfit for existence, no longer human and less than animal, a thing that knows nothing but pain and drags itself through its span of years in the agony of unthinking self-destruction.

No, you do not have to think; it is an act of moral choice. But someone had to think to keep you alive; if you choose to default, you default on existence and you pass the deficit to some moral man, expecting him to sacrifice his good for the sake of letting you survive *by your evil*. (Rand 1957, 1015; emphasis added)

There are some interesting questions of interpretation here, but what is important to note now is that Rand regards the choice to live as requiring the choice to live as a man and the choice to live as a man as requiring the choice to think (or as Peikoff puts it, the choice to focus<sup>16</sup>). All of these choices then are of one piece or at least very closely linked.

Before going any further in discussing the relationship between the choice to think and the ultimate value of living as a flourishing rational animal, it is important that we differentiate a concept from a reality. So, let us reflect briefly on an issue from epistemology and logic by considering a claim made notorious by Berkeley: “Physical objects cannot be thought of as existing apart from a thinking mind.” This claim can mean (a) physical objects cannot be thought-of-as-existing apart from a thinking mind, or (b) physical objects cannot be thought of as existing-apart-from-a-thinking mind. Statement (a) is true and obvious, but this does not mean that what one thinks about cannot exist without being thought of. There is a difference between the act of awareness and the object of awareness, and the truth of (a) does not establish (b). There is ultimately a difference between something as it exists in cognition and as it exists independently of cognition. As Aquinas states:

Although it is necessary for the truth of a cognition that the cognition answer to the thing known, still it is not necessary that the mode of the thing known be the same as the mode of its cognition. (*Summa contra gentiles*, II, 75; my translation)

Our concepts, propositions, and arguments are ultimately *of* or *about* reality. They are tools for knowing reality, but there is still a difference between them and reality.

If we ignore the difference between concepts and reality or if we blur it, we get ourselves into serious trouble.<sup>17</sup> We end up making the existence and nature of a reality depend on its cognition. Therefore, when it comes to considering how the choice to think is related to the ultimate end or value of living as a flourishing rational animal, we need to make clear whether we are talking about this ultimate end or

value as a concept or as a reality. Yet, there is another complexity that needs to be added to these considerations. As noted earlier, we need to differentiate the potentiality human beings have for their mature state—that is, living as a flourishing rational animal—and that state as an actuality. We can thus talk of what would be actually good for human beings if they were to know and choose it, and we can talk of what would not be actually good for human beings if they were to know and choose it. Accordingly, we can talk of what is ultimately valuable or good or indeed choice-worthy for human beings to come to know and choose apart from whether they do in fact know or choose it. In other words, we may say that there is an ultimate human good or *telos*, which exists as a potentiality, that does not depend on its being cognized to either exist or be what it is.

Yet, by the very same considerations, it is also impossible for there to be a *concept* of what is ultimately good or choice-worthy for human beings apart from an act of cognition. Such a concept comes to exist only through the effort to focus. Indeed, this is true for all evaluations or measurements of any kind. They do not exist without an act of cognition and, of course, someone who is performing that act.

Now, the distinction between a concept and a reality is fairly obvious, but when one gets involved in complex issues of the sort that are being discussed here, it is easy to confuse the two—and this is, regrettably, what Machan does. Throughout his reply he confuses what is necessary for our knowledge and achievement of what is good and valuable for a human being with what is necessary for its existence as our basic potentiality and *telos*. He does this especially when it comes to the issue of whether one can morally evaluate a person who chooses not to think. He argues that unless a person chooses to think that person cannot have a concept of what is good and obligatory and “thus” cannot be morally evaluated. Such persons have “no way of knowing [what they] ought to do or not to do” (Machan 2006, 271). Yet, this confuses a concept with a reality.

There is a difference between our knowledge of what is good and obligatory, and the reality that provides the basis for this knowledge. It is not the *concept* of what is good for human beings that ultimately

determines what one ought to do, but the fundamental nature of human beings—specifically; it is their inherent potentiality for maturation or flourishing (which is their good) that determines their obligations. Thus, if we are dealing with human beings with the capacity to think, then one can say that they have the moral responsibility to think simply because of what they are—because they have the potentiality for their mature state. If they fail to use their capacity to think and thus fail to have knowledge of what their lives require, this does not free them from the charge of having failed to fulfill a basic moral responsibility.

Of course, this responsibility does not occur as an abstraction but varies with persons and context. One would not, for example, expect the responsibilities of a young teenager to be the same as those of an adult. Indeed, as Machan correctly notes, the exercise of thought does not occur all at once, but is manifested in one's efforts to know and achieve particular things throughout the many stages of one's life. Further, if we recall that thinking is itself not some special power that is unrelated to all the other powers of a living thing, then it should be recognized that the choice to think is never a choice between literal unconsciousness and consciousness but is rather part of a continuum of cognitive efforts that involve many different levels of awareness.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, it is still the case that as long as we are dealing with human beings with the capacity to think, then they have the moral responsibility to exercise the choice to think as it is manifested in the particular situations and contexts of their lives. Only by confusing concepts with realities could it be supposed that human beings do not have an obligation to choose to think.

### **What Is Objectivity for Rand?**

It might be objected, however, that in making this last response, and indeed in presenting the neo-Aristotelian view, I have ignored what is unique about Rand's ethics and indeed her philosophy—namely, her account of objectivity. It is her account of objectivity that provides the ultimate foundation for holding the choice to think or live as fundamental for ethics. Thus, it is to her account of objectivity

that we must now go.

In her *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, Rand (1990, 54) says that only her theory of concepts treats them as objective, that is, “as neither revealed nor invented, but as produced by man’s consciousness in accordance with the facts of reality, as mental integrations of factual data as computed by man—as the products of a cognitive method of classification whose processes must be performed by man, but whose content is dictated by reality.” This statement is, however, perfectly compatible with the neo-Aristotelian interpretation of Rand’s ethics. Indeed, the earlier citation from Aquinas (see page 320 above) is but another, albeit more abstract, way of making the same point. However, what should be noted here is that Rand is defining what it is for a *concept* to be objective; she is not defining what it is for something to be a reality.

Machan in a recent work cites this very passage from Rand after noting that “it is vital not to confuse [Rand’s] sense of ‘objective’ with one that suggests that values are intrinsic in something (human life, nature, a painting). Objective values are instead relational, bearing on *the value* some conduct or state of affairs has for a being to which things can be of value” (Machan 2004, 82 n. 1; emphasis added). This claim is also one that the neo-Aristotelian interpretation of Rand’s ethics could accept. Values are indeed relational realities. But here is the rub: Machan is in his comments not talking about what it is for a *concept* to be objective; he is talking about values as realities. He does not differentiate between the kind of relations that must exist for the concept of values to be objective from the kinds of relations that are necessary for values to exist and be what they are. He thus leaves himself open to confusing concepts with realities and accepting the antirealist assumption that what is good or obligatory for human beings exists only if it is the object of the act of human cognition.

Rand’s account of objectivity cited above does not support this assumption, however. There is nothing in her view of the objective nature of concepts that requires denying realism—that is, that realities exist and are what they are independent and apart from their cognition.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, it is crucial to identify the source of this confusion.

It stems from failing to distinguish complex relational realities that can exist independently of cognition from those relations that come to exist only by virtue of some cognitive act. Put a little differently, our concepts or propositions are objective or true if they ultimately match up with reality, but such objectivity or truth is not the same as the realities to which they match up. Our evaluation of how certain facts relate to what is good and valuable for human beings requires a cognitive act to exist, but the reality that is the standard for such evaluation does not depend on its cognition to exist. Rand likes to say that everything in existence can be measured, and the act of measuring requires, of course, a *measurer*. But this does not mean that what is measured or the basis for measurement that a thing's nature affords exists only if it is measured. Living as a flourishing rational animal exists as a potentiality and *telos* that provides the basis for measuring human conduct whether it is conceptually grasped or not, and this is the basis for our responsibilities.<sup>20</sup>

## **Voluntarism**

In the sentence immediately before the passages from *Atlas Shrugged* cited above, Rand (1957, 1015) says, "The only man who desires to be moral is the man who desires to live." Yet, what determines what a man desires? Are human beings simply slaves to their passions, or can knowing what is good or choice-worthy actually be used to create appropriate desires? Are rational desires possible? Here is the basic problem of ethics. How do we translate our knowledge of what is good or choice-worthy into our conduct? In other words, our reason needs to be able to connect to our desires and choices. There needs to be something that provides a connection between what we apprehend as good and what our desires and choices are ultimately *for*, and this something cannot be determined by our desires and choices. Thus, we can now see just how acute Long's initial assessment of the problems faced by the "official doctrine" was. He saw that unless living as a flourishing rational animal is a *telos* that provides the ultimate guide for our desires and choices, then the possibility of providing a foundation for morality is lost.

There is, however, another way of making this final point, and it is simply this. If, as noted earlier, the function of human choice is dictated by human choice, and if this is ultimate, then it follows that the functions our reason serves are also dictated by choice. In fact, it is only through our acts of will that our reason can move us to do or achieve anything. Our reason is powerless on its own. Yet, if this so, then we should realize that reason is and can only be subservient to our commitments.<sup>21</sup> Will, choice, or faith, call it what you may, is ultimate. But if this is what the “official doctrine” requires, then the key thinker for Rand’s ethics is not Aristotle, but Luther.

## Notes

1. It should also be said that this essay continues the discussion of many of the issues that were raised in Rasmussen 2002, and thus this essay presupposes many of the points made therein. The current essay has benefitted from the helpful suggestions of Douglas J. Den Uyl, Robert L. Campbell, and Chris Matthew Sciabarra.

2. The relevant material from *Atlas Shrugged* is cited below on page 319.

3. I have changed the punctuation slightly and reordered the list.

4. The interpretation that gives Rand’s ethics the best chance of being true will also help us to resolve the following questions: Does Rand’s ethics make the most sense if, on the one hand, human choice is the basis for determining our ultimate end and thus our obligations, or if, on the other hand, human choice is *for* one’s ultimate end—flourishing as a rational animal—and this is the basis for determining our obligations? Is something an ultimate end because we choose it or do we choose because there is an ultimate end?

5. As Aquinas states, “man is master of his actions through his reason and will; whence, too, the free-will is defined as ‘the faculty and will of reason.’” *Summa Theologiae* IaIIae, 1.1.

6. Of course, they are free not to exist—as we find in the case of substantial change.

7. See Rasmussen and Den Uyl 2005, 117–27 for a more detailed account of this neo-Aristotelian view.

8. See Rand’s discussion of life as the ultimate value and end in itself in “The Objectivist Ethics” (1964, 17).

9. Copleston 1964, 114–15, notes that there are two alternatives to Kant’s categorical imperative—a problematic hypothetical imperative and an assertoric hypothetical imperative—and that an Aristotelian ethics in which *eudaemonia* (human flourishing) is judged as the actualization of the potentialities of man qua man provides an assertoric hypothetical imperative.

10. Indeed, it is also a mistake to see the fundamental character of *rights* as being deontological, but this does not mean that rights are consequentialist principles or even expressions of human flourishing. For an account of how rights fit into this

view, see Rasmussen and Den Uyl 2005.

11. Since Machan (2006, 266) states that he will “leave aside for now whether living *per se* or living *qua* human being is at issue,” I will simply continue to proceed in this discussion as if choosing to live is the same as choosing to live the life that is proper to man—that is, living *qua* man—and that the language of flourishing is but another way of expressing this point. It may be that for Rand they are not, and it may also be that one cannot really separate the question of whether the choice to live is premoral from the question of whether life is to be understood in terms of flourishing. If so, then that will need to be examined on some other occasion.

12. Indeed, the end or value of life makes choosing or valuing *necessary* as well.

13. Miller (2005, 17–18 n. 65) also notes that in *Ayn Rand Answers* (Rand 2005, 107), Rand states that “ends are not chosen irrationally” and that “‘The Objectivist Ethics’ provides the essence” of her stand on ends and means. He notes further that “‘Causality Versus Duty’” was published in 1970. “The Objectivist Ethics” was published in 1964.

14. In Rasmussen 2002, 78–79, I noted that, in her essay “Causality Versus Duty,” Rand speaks of someone (a) “*not* choosing to live” and does not speak of someone (b) “choosing *not* to live.” I further noted that this difference might be important to understanding what she is ultimately saying, but I was not sure. By drawing this distinction, I did not, however, wish to deny, as Machan (2006, 267) claims, that one does choose to live. Of course, I did, and still do, reject the claim that this choice is premoral. Further, I would still insist that Machan does not show that there is no distinction between (a) and (b). Yet, I do not think that this distinction is crucial to any point being discussed here.

15. She does reject unchosen obligations, but she understands these as “mystic” duties or Kantian categorical imperatives and does not consider what they might mean in an Aristotelian context in which teleology is biocentric. Nor does Rand consider the differences between a problematic hypothetical imperative and an assertoric hypothetical imperative.

16. Peikoff (1991, 59) states that “the choice to focus . . . is man’s primary choice. ‘Primary’ here means: presupposed by all other choices and itself irreducible.” Cf. Branden 1969, 36–47, which draws from his January–February 1966 *Objectivist* articles, “The Objectivist Theory of Volition.”

17. Rand (1990, 35) notes in chapter four, “Concepts of Consciousness,” that when one focuses on the action of consciousness, as opposed to its content, one forms concepts of consciousness. These concepts have to do with the mental grasp of reality and should not be confused with what is grasped—that is, the existential content. Concepts such as “knowledge,” “science,” “idea,” etc., are not the same things as the phenomena they are about. Yet, on other occasions, for example, in her discussion of the nature of moral values in her essay, “What is Capitalism?” (in Rand 1967, 14), she does not clearly maintain this distinction. For an examination of her discussion, see my forthcoming essay, “The Aristotelian Significance of the Section Titles of *Atlas Shrugged*: A Brief Consideration of Rand’s View of Logic and Reality,” in Younkins (forthcoming).

18. See Rand 1990 for a discussion of implicit concepts and how human cognition develops. See also her discussion of these points in the appendix to the same book, “Excerpts from the Epistemology Workshops.” Finally, see Campbell’s

(2002, 310–14) most illuminating discussion of this issue.

19. This is of vital importance, for without realism a basis for objectivity is very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Yet, this is a huge issue and is beyond this essay's scope.

20. It might be replied, however, that Rand actually wants to make an antirealist claim of a certain sort. If, according to the "official doctrine," there are no ethical obligations unless one chooses to live, and if one does not choose to live unless one chooses to think (or to focus one's mind), then it might be that all of ethics depends on the premoral choice to live and think (or focus). Thus, the human good has reality only in and through human cognition. Further, it might be argued that since this choice is implicit in everything we think and do, nearly everyone must make this choice to live and think. Thus, though the good exists only in cognition, it so exists for more or less everyone. The good exists *qua object before human minds* and is in this sense "objective" for almost everyone. This certainly seems like a path that someone might wish to take in defending the "official doctrine," but it is dangerously close to a Kantian approach to moral epistemology. It also seems to raise more difficulties that it solves. For example, can universal, or near universal, intersubjectivity be a sufficient ground for objectivity, or will this collapse into conceptual relativism? I will not, however, pursue this point here, but I will leave it for some young conceptual entrepreneur to develop.

21. Douglas J. Den Uyl suggested to me the following *reductio ad absurdum*. Let us grant, for the sake of the argument, the doctrine of premoral choice. Let us grant also that life is the ultimate value. Given then an initial choice to live and life as the ultimate value, all choices beyond the first one will be measured in terms of being either choices to live or choices about the means to live. Choices that do not respect the ultimate end of life are choices not to live. But if all this is so, then the "official position" has no ethics whatsoever; because if all of the foregoing assumptions hold, then *all* choices are choices between life and "death." And if that is so, then *all choices are in the same state as the first choice*. Thus, either all choices are premoral—they all must make an initial commitment to life first, and so on *ad infinitum*—or there is no such thing as a premoral choice that originates morality. The latter alternative is compatible with and implied by the neo-Aristotelian alternative to the "official doctrine." See also Rasmussen 2002, 82.

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