

A Dialogue on Ayn Rand's Ethics

Reply to Eric Mack, "Problematic Arguments in Randian Ethics" (Fall 2003)

Did Ayn Rand Do the Shuffle?

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In "Problematic Arguments in Randian Ethics," philosopher Eric Mack (2003, 2) argues that, in her essay, "The Objectivist Ethics," Ayn Rand "pervasively commits the Shuffle in the course of her arguments about what is required for human survival." Mack defines the "Shuffle" as a series of defective argumentative moves.

The Core Issue in Understanding Randian Ethics

Mack has carefully and thoroughly focused on an issue that has puzzled Objectivists for decades. How did Rand move from (1) her metaethical argument that, because existence or nonexistence is the fundamental alternative facing each living organism, the standard of value for each organism is its life, to (2) her ethical prescription for each human being to live as "man qua man," pursuing the values of reason, purpose, and self-esteem by employing the virtues of rationality, productiveness, and pride¹ (in Mack's terminology, "refined survival")? After all, as Mack and others have noted, Rand's apparent starting point, mere survival (in Mack's terminology, "unrefined survival"), requires so much less.

This paper will consider three issues raised by Mack's analysis. The first two involve the interpretation of Rand's essay entitled "The Objectivist Ethics," when read together with her other writings, in particular, *Atlas Shrugged*. The third involves his proposed substitution of "well-being" for "survival" as the ultimate good.

Interpreting “The Objectivist Ethics”: What Did Rand Mean by “Man”?

The first issue is Mack’s interpretation of what Rand meant when she used the term “man.” This paper will offer an interpretation of Rand’s use of the term “man” in describing man’s mode of existence, which would convert Mack’s contention that her argument involves a “shuffle” into a much less damning indictment: that Rand got carried away in overstating the negative effects of not following the Objectivist ethics.

To help make clear which of the many uses of “man” in “The Objectivist Ethics” fall into the category of describing his mode of existence, I will provide a few examples. One such statement quoted by Mack is, “he [‘man’] is a specific organism of a specific nature that requires specific action to sustain his life. He cannot achieve his survival by arbitrary means nor by random motions nor by blind urges nor by chance nor by whim. That which his survival requires is set by his nature and is not open to his choice” (Rand 1964, 22). Other examples of such uses of “man” include “A plant can obtain its food from the soil in which it grows. An animal has to hunt for it. Man has to produce it” (18); “Man’s actions and survival require the guidance of *conceptual* values derived from *conceptual* knowledge” (20); and “He cannot provide for his simplest physical needs without a process of thought” (21). This *descriptive* context is to be distinguished from a *prescriptive* context; Rand clearly intended her prescriptive statements to apply to each and every individual human being.

The single statement that most gives one pause about Mack’s argument appears on page 35 of his essay: “one of the favorite themes of Rand as a social-cultural commentator is that lots of people are surviving on the basis of other people’s rationality and productivity. Nevertheless, within her basic ethical theorizing nothing could be more discomfiting than acknowledging that lots of individuals survive without themselves employing conceptual awareness and being productive.” It is difficult to believe that the author of *Atlas Shrugged* was uncomfortable acknowledging the fundamental facts underlying its theme. To assert such discomfort, Mack must have

missed something in Rand's ethical theorizing.

The statement just quoted builds on Mack's preceding discussion, on pages 34 and 35, in which he states:

Throughout the last paragraph I have placed quotation marks around "man" and "man's survival" to remind the reader of a very striking feature of Rand's discussion of what human survival requires of people. One would expect Rand, the supreme individualist, to say that the survival of each human being requires *that* individual's conceptual awareness and that the survival of each individual human being requires *that* individual's productivity (and non-parasitism). It is far from clear *exactly* why Rand speaks continuously of "man" and "man's survival." The most generous interpretation of what is going on is that Rand is seeking to put aside distracting contingencies and to focus resolutely on essentials. Rand's proceeding in terms of "man" and "man's survival" saves us from being distracted by certain particular facts, viz., instances in which individuals seem to survive without conceptual awareness or through parasitism. Rand . . . focuses our attention firmly on a deeply grounded general pattern, viz., individuals by and large survive through their own conceptual awareness and productivity. Unfortunately, it may be that we should be attentive to (i.e., distracted by) these particular facts. It may be that the deeply grounded general pattern is not the only thing essential to determining whether it is *universally* true that human survival requires conceptual awareness and productivity on the part of the surviving individual. If we are really interested in whether conceptual awareness and productivity are always required for human survival we cannot begin with the presumption that particular cases in which an individual's conceptual awareness or her productivity do not seem to be required for her survival . . . are *distracting* contingencies. We cannot presume that the only *essential* facts are those that are part of the general pattern. However precisely we disentangle Rand's continual

invocation of the generic “man” and his generic “survival,” . . . its effect is to draw attention away from counterexamples to the claim that, for each human individual conceptual awareness and productivity are required for her survival.

This passage illustrates three things about Mack’s argument. First, he admits to confusion (which is not uncommon among readers of Rand) about exactly what Rand meant by “man” and “man’s survival.” Second, he offers, as his most generous interpretation, that Rand meant to focus on essentials in her definition of “man.” Third, he nevertheless goes on to interpret Rand’s argument *as if* “man,” in the context of describing his mode of existence, means each and every individual.

What did Rand mean by “man”? While she never made this clear in “The Objectivist Ethics,” she did shed some light on the issue in a letter to John Hospers (29 April 1961), published in *Letters of Ayn Rand*, which includes the following passage:

You ask what I would say to someone who said: “Since the standard is man’s life—not just your or my or my family’s life—why then should we not strive to improve man’s life in general, even if in doing so I do not improve my own, or even extinguish my own life completely?”

I would remind the questioner of the difference between an *abstraction* and a *collective noun* (“Man” is an abstraction, “mankind” is a collective noun.)² (Rand 1995, 561)

Thus, by distinguishing both mankind and individuals, Rand used the term “man” in the manner suggested as an alternative by Mack, as “[putting] aside distracting contingencies and [focusing] resolutely on essentials.”

David Kelley offers an interpretation of Rand’s use of the term “man” in the context of describing his mode of existence, and based upon this interpretation, Kelley (2001, 62–63) offers a solution to the core issue:

For Rand, ethics as a branch of inquiry is analogous to ethology in the life sciences. Ethologists like Konrad Lorenz and Karl Von Frisch wanted to understand animal behavior, not in terms of its proximate causes such as reflexes or conditioning, but rather in terms of its teleological function. Their goal was to understand the mode of life of each species—its particular way of surviving in a particular environment, given its particular needs and capacities. Rand saw ethics as a kind of human ethology; her concept of “man’s life qua man” is really an ethological concept of man’s mode of life. As such, it incorporates both survival and flourishing. For humans as for plants and animals, to flourish is to thrive in the enterprise of life: to satisfy our needs abundantly through the vigorous and efficacious use of our capacities. The values constituting the state of flourishing are established *as* values—i.e., proven to be valuable—by showing how they meet our needs, or enable the use of our capacities, and thereby contribute to our long-term survival. *Leading a full life is the only way to achieve mere life—securely and over the natural course of a lifespan.* (emphasis added)

If Kelley’s concluding statement were true, it would provide a solution to the core issue. That is, “leading a full life,” by which Kelley presumably means pursuing the Randian values of reason, purpose, and self-esteem by employing the Randian virtues of rationality, productiveness, and pride, is necessary in order to survive. However, the problem is that while Kelley’s conclusion is true much of the time, it is not true universally. As Mack notes, there are too many “pesky counterexamples” of people surviving a long time without being rational or productive. Nevertheless, Kelley’s argument may offer a way to solve the core issue—if we can discover a context in which Kelley’s conclusion is true.

Under what circumstances would Kelley’s conclusion (“leading a full life is the only way to achieve mere life—securely and over the natural course of a lifespan”) be true? Galt’s speech contains the following statement:

You who prattle that morality is social and that man would need no morality on a desert island—it is on a desert island that he would need it most. Let him try to claim, when there are no victims to pay for it, that a rock is a house, that sand is clothing, that food will drop into his mouth without cause or effort . . . —and reality will wipe him out, as he deserves; reality will show him that life is a value to be bought and that thinking is the only coin noble enough to buy it. (Rand [1957] 1992, 1018)

In this statement, Rand clearly identifies one context in which “leading a full life is the only way to achieve mere life—securely and over the natural course of a lifespan.” Let us call this context “isolated man.”

Under what circumstance would Kelley’s conclusion apply to individuals living in society? I would like to offer an interpretation, drawn from various statements by Rand, but principally from the theme of *Atlas Shrugged*. The question asked by Rand that gave rise to *Atlas Shrugged* was “what if the men of the mind went on strike?” That is, “what if everyone became non-productive?” This is a subset of a more general question: “what if everyone did that?” In effect, Rand was operating, at least implicitly, on the principle of universalizability.

Some commentators have tried to minimize Rand’s reliance on universalizability in developing her ethics, on the grounds that it is “Kantian” and since Rand rejected Kant, universalizability must have been, at best, a marginal component of her ethics. For example, Roderick T. Long (2000, 35–36) writes:

The Kantian strand in Rand’s egoism is the weakest and least prominent of the three [strains] . . . [It] shows up in the following passages:

“The only ‘obligation’ involved in individual rights is an obligation imposed, not by the state, but by the nature of reality (i.e., by the law of identity): *consistency*, which, in this

case, means the obligation to respect the rights of others, if one wishes one's own rights to be recognized and protected" [citing "The Wreckage of the Consensus" in Rand 1967, 227].

"When you declare that men are irrational animals and propose to treat them as such, you thereby defined your own character and can no longer claim the sanction of reason—as no advocate of contradictions can claim it . . ." [citing Rand [1957] 1992, 1023]

In addition, in her 29 April 1961 letter to John Hospers, Rand wrote: "if he values his own life, he has to recognize the right of all other human beings to value their own lives in the same way. . . . If he holds the support of his own life by his own effort and the achievement of his own happiness as his primary goal, he has to grant the same right to others; *if he does not grant it, he is guilty of a contradiction and cannot claim any rational validity for his own right*" (1995, 556; emphasis added). This statement, read in isolation, appears to relate to the derivative issue of rights, but read in the context of the entire discussion (see, e.g., the statement in the preceding paragraph, "The right to exist and to pursue his own happiness does not give man the right to act irrationally . . ."), it seems clear that Rand was talking about ethics.

These statements by Rand demonstrate her reliance on universalizability as an ethical principle—however much this discomfits certain scholars in the Randian tradition. While some might argue that the statements quoted by Long apply only to the issue of rights, I would argue that *any* use of universalizability means that it must apply to *all* ethical issues. The fact that universalizability is not a marginal principle appearing in a few isolated quotes, but is central to Rand's ethics, is shown by the key question underlying her magnum opus, *Atlas Shrugged*.

It is important to note two points in connection with the inclusion of universalizability in Rand's ethics. First, at what level of generality or particularity does the principle apply? Does everyone

have to be an architect or run a railroad? No—Rand makes the appropriate level of generality clear in her formulation of the principal values and virtues in the Objectivist ethics. Second, universalizability is not the *primary* principle in Rand's ethics. Her ethics are grounded in reality. If it were not true that an individual human being would be significantly more likely to survive by being rational and productive, then directing the question "what if everyone did that" to those who are not rational and productive would have no purpose or effect. Both the inclusion of universalizability in Rand's ethics and the primacy of reality over universalizability is illustrated by the following excerpts from her 29 April 1961 letter to John Hospers on the Golden Rule and Kant's categorical imperative:

You state the best criticism of these two rules when you say that they are "*content-less*." With this, I agree emphatically. They tell us nothing about moral values. . . .

At best, these two rules are popular generalizations illustrating one aspect or consequence of the principle of *objectivity* or *justice*. I would agree with these two rules (on the popular level) only if they were translated to mean: "Do not wish, seek or advocate contradictions"—and then only if they were regarded as derivatives or consequences of deeper, antecedent moral premises, *not* as fundamental principles or definitions of moral action. (Rand 1995, 557–58)

Why is universalizability relevant to this critique of Mack's argument? The answer is that it allows us to posit a Randian conception of "man" for whom it would be true that "leading a full life is the only way to achieve mere life—securely and over the natural course of a lifespan." If everyone in society either employed rationality and productiveness or did not do so, then (1) when everyone does so, everyone will survive, and (2) when no one does so, no one will survive. The result in a social context would be the same as in the "isolated man" context. Let us call this second context, for lack of a better term, "universal man." Thus, I would argue, when

Rand repeatedly referred to “man” and “man’s survival” in the context of describing his mode of existence in “The Objectivist Ethics,” what she really meant is a combination of “isolated man” and “universal man.”

In addition to the theme of *Atlas Shrugged* and the two explicit statements of universalizability quoted above, other less explicit support for the idea that her ethics includes the universalizability principle can be inferred from two additional Randian concepts: (1) the harmony of interests among men, and (2) self-esteem.

In “The Objectivist Ethics,” Rand states: “The Objectivist ethics . . . holds that the *rational* interests of men do not clash—that there is no conflict of interests among men who . . . deal with one another as *traders* . . .” (1964, 31). That is, if *everyone* operated in accordance with the trader principle, there would be a harmony of interests among *all* men.

Interpreting “The Objectivist Ethics”: Why Does Mack Fail to Refer to Self-Esteem and Pride?

Now let us turn to a curious omission from Mack’s otherwise detailed discussion of Rand’s ethics—the role she assigns to the value of self-esteem and the virtue of pride. In chapter 2 of *The Virtue of Selfishness*, immediately following “The Objectivist Ethics,” Nathaniel Branden writes: “In order to deal with reality successfully—to pursue and achieve the values which his life requires—man needs self-esteem: he needs to be confident of his efficacy and worth” (in Rand 1964, 36). Branden is clearly arguing for the survival value of this psychological characteristic.

Rand ([1957] 1992, 1018) defined self-esteem as follows: “Self-esteem [is] his inviolate certainty that his mind is competent to think and his person is worthy of happiness, which means: is worthy of living.” Referring back to this statement, Nathaniel Branden (1969, 104) more succinctly presented Rand’s concept of self-esteem as follows: “It is the conviction that one is competent to live and worthy of living.” What is meant by “competent to live”? It seems clear that Rand does not mean being a competent predator or parasite, but

means to live as “man qua man,” that is, as man should (as all men could if they all operated on the same principles). Similarly, Rand’s concept of pride, as “moral ambitiousness” and as “[earning] the right to hold oneself as one’s own highest value by achieving one’s own moral perfection” (Rand 1964, 27), when read in conjunction with the virtues of rationality and productiveness, cannot mean the striving to be a really good predator or parasite. It can only mean striving to live as “man qua man,” that is, as man should (as all men could if they all operated on the same principles).

Thus, Rand’s concepts of self-esteem and pride tie in nicely with her concept of the harmony of interests, and both provide additional support for universalizability as an important part of Rand’s ethical infrastructure.

While I cannot, of course, discern Mack’s rationale for omitting any discussion of self-esteem and pride, I would argue that the *effect* of such omissions is to make bare physical survival appear to be more plausibly Randian, that is, to make his argument appear stronger.

Mack’s Proposed Substitution of “Well-being” for “Survival” as the Ultimate Good

Mack (2003, 11) disputes Rand’s “key claim . . . that the life of [a living] entity is what has ultimate value for that entity,” and argues for the alternative view that “what has ultimate value is the *good (well-being)* of that entity.” Mack presents a list of things that Rand seems to say make up the concept of well-being (12). This list overlaps Rand’s values and virtues to a significant degree. Mack appears to be attempting to offer a second dimension to life in addition to the simple longitudinal dimension of “bare survival.”

One problem with Mack’s approach is that is circular. Asserting that “the ultimate value is the good” is simply saying that “the good is the good.” A second problem is admitted by Mack in an endnote: “An advocate of this alternative will eventually have to explain how robustly he can account for certain conditions being constitutive and other conditions not being constitutive of individual well-being” (61 n. 13). That is, Mack has provided no grounding in reality for “well-

being” as the ultimate good.

I would argue that the only plausible criterion for determining what conditions are constitutive of a living entity’s well-being is whether such conditions aid in the furtherance of its life, and that no other criterion can be grounded in reality, as opposed to subjective preference. To quote Kelley (2001, 63) again: “The values constituting the state of flourishing are established *as* values—i.e., proven to be valuable—by showing how they . . . contribute to our long-term survival.”

Conclusion: Where Rand Went Too Far

I have argued that, in “The Objectivist Ethics,” Rand did not engage in a “shuffle,” as Mack charges, but rather that the development of her ethics was based upon an internally consistent view of “man,” in the context of describing his mode of existence, which was never explained, and which was largely hidden from the reader: “man” as the combination of “isolated man” and “universal man,” as I have defined these terms above. Nevertheless, Mack’s argument that Rand engaged in a “shuffle” is given credibility by some of Rand’s overstatements about the negative effects of not following her ethical prescriptions. Here are just a few examples, also cited by Mack: “The survival of such mental parasites depends on blind chance . . .” (Rand 1964, 23), “Such looters are parasites incapable of survival, who exist by destroying those who *are* capable . . .” (23), and “Such looters may achieve their goals for the range of a moment, at the price of destruction: the destruction of their victims and their own. As evidence, I offer you any criminal or any dictatorship” (24). Recast in the light of the interpretation proposed in this paper of Rand’s view of “man,” however, these overstatements make more sense; if the underlying question is “what if everyone did that?” then, e.g., looters and moochers *are* incapable of survival.

It goes without saying that the interpretation advanced here of Rand’s intentions in her repeated uses of the term “man” in “The Objectivist Ethics” is based primarily on inference from the theme of *Atlas Shrugged* and a few statements she made elsewhere. As such, this

interpretation may never be *proven* correct. Nevertheless, I hope it offers insights that might solve some of the problems that have been the subject of commentary by Rand scholars.

Notes

1. Note that this formulation of Rand's virtues is different from Mack's "conceptual awareness" and "productivity," most importantly because it includes pride, which Mack does not discuss. As noted below, Mack also fails to discuss self-esteem as one of Rand's values.

2. Note, however, that in "The Objectivist Ethics," Rand (1964, 22) inadvertently uses the term to mean "mankind," when she says "Man is the only living species that has the power to act as his own destroyer—and that is the way he has acted through most of his history."

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