

A Dialogue on Ayn Rand's Ethics

Reply to Douglas B. Rasmussen, "Rand on Obligation and Value" (Fall 2002)
and Eric Mack, "Problematic Arguments in Randian Ethics" (Fall 2003)

Rand and Choice

Tibor R. Machan

Introduction

Ever since Ayn Rand presented her metaethical and ethical positions, there has been a controversy about whether the claim that her ethics has objective validity—that the ethical judgments that are contained and implied by her position are true—could be sustained. The reason is that unlike earlier objectivist—or realist—ethics, Rand's position does not rest on any kind of categorical ethical imperative or moral good. She does not appeal to some intrinsic goodness that we are under an obligation to pursue in virtue of its being good; rather, she contends that only when someone has made the choice to live his or her human life, does the ultimate value of living it *qua* man materialize.

Here are the passages—quoted by Douglas B. Rasmussen (2002) in his *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* article "Rand on Obligation and Value"—where Rand lays out her position:

My morality, the morality of reason, is contained in a single axiom: existence exists—and in a single choice: to live. The rest proceeds from these. (Rand 1961, 128)

Life or death is man's only fundamental alternative. To live is his basic act of choice. If he chooses to live, a rational ethics will tell him what principles of action are required to implement his choice. If he does not choose to live, nature

will take its course.

Reality confronts man with a great many “musts,” but all of them are conditional; the formula for realistic necessity is: “You must, if—” and “if” stands for man’s choice: “—if you want to achieve a certain goal.” You must eat, if you want to survive. You must work, if you want to eat. You must think—if you want to work. You must look to reality, if you want to think—if you want to know what to do—if you want to know what goals to choose—if you want to know how to achieve them. (“Causality Versus Duty” [1970] in Rand 1982, 118–19)

My own discussion of the first choice that brings morality into play can be found in my book, *Individuals and Their Rights* (Machan 1989, 56ff). Here is what I said there:

As to why that initial, fundamental choice should be made, the question reveals a misunderstanding of the classical egoist position. One either does or does not make it. Not making it poses no moral problems unless one has already made the choice and then changes one’s mind, which would then be a default on a commitment and would ordinarily involve the neglect of other [perhaps related] persons to whom one has also made commitments. But if initially the choice is to bow out of life, then, to the best of our knowledge, one needs no moral guidelines.¹ (57)

If we accept Rand’s view that we have free will, that means that there is a choice that we can (continually) make to live and to think—or, to put it as I would, we can keep up the initiative to live and to think. Prior to such a choice, we are at most surviving physically with a mind that is in limbo, unfocused, so there can be no awareness yet of any alternatives among which one might select one and reject others. Once, however, we have made the choice to think, such alternatives can come into focus and the process of selection can

commence. At that point, rejecting the alternative of remaining in focus, or continuing to think, can be seen to involve an evasion of something of enormous value.

Of course, this line of argument assumes that human beings have free will, so there is a point when a young human being first summons herself to the task of thinking. Rasmussen (2002) does not reject this view of free will. Neither does Eric Mack (2003), in his *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* essay “Problematic Arguments in Randian Ethics.” Those who do reject it are opting for a radically non-Randian approach to ethics and aren’t really party to this discussion.

Mack’s Version of the Dreaded Charge of Subjectivism

Rand’s view, as I believe I have captured it above, has now been tarnished with the dreaded charge of subjectivism. In what began as a review essay of a book by Craig Biddle (2002), *Loving Life: The Morality of Self-Interest and the Facts that Support It*, Mack levels the charge as follows: “Biddle’s claim is the *subjectivist* claim that it is an agent’s actual choice of life as his ultimate goal that *makes* his life ultimately valuable” (Mack 2003, 14). Mack claims that Biddle and, by implication, others who follow Rand’s metaethics are subjectivists, just like Hume, who “is a subjectivist—precisely because he held that our ultimate ends are determined by our affections, not by reason.” As Mack states the point: “A person’s choice of life as his ultimate value is, on this view, not itself justified by anything; that choice must in itself be viewed as purely arbitrary—as a pure act of subjective will” (14).

It seems to me that Mack is conflating two positions. One, the *bona fide* subjectivist one, does involve *arbitrarily* choosing one of several possible goals—let me pregnantly call them *live options*—and then treating only the means to it as objective. The goal itself is indeed subjective because any one of a number of such live options can be a candidate for selection as that which one will pursue. The other, what Rand and her students consider an objectivist one, concerns not an arbitrary but a *basic* conditional value. If one is going

to be a living human being, one must do so and so. The other option is not, as it were, a live one!

Is this subjectivist or not? Consider the following: Suppose I roll a ball down a hill and say, now that it has been given the initial shove, it will (necessarily, given the contour of the terrain, the slope, the law of gravity) have such and such speed, reach the bottom at such and such time, crush objects in its path with such force, etc. Are these subjective claims? Given the nature of the ball and the hill, what follows from shoving the former down the latter is objective, not subjective in the slightest. Sure, one need not have shoved the ball at all, in which case there would be no applications of any of the laws of mechanics for the rolling ball. The ball would just sit there, on top, doing nothing. Of course, these are predictions instead of moral judgments, but that is because the ball lacks the capacity to attempt to circumvent the laws of its proper progress to its ultimate end. Human beings do have that capacity, so it isn't possible to predict that they will make this or that progress to their proper end. All that can be said of them is that given their proper end, they ought to conduct themselves so and so in order to reach it. (I leave aside here whether the way of reaching their proper end is itself a constitutive element of this proper end or merely a means to it.)

So, similarly, if one does not choose to live, then the laws of how one ought to live will not apply. But once a human being chooses to live, the laws of how such beings ought to live will apply—and they will be objective. As J. Roger Lee puts it: “There is no problem of subjectivism. Would one say that a scientific theory is subjective just because the facts it integrates into human knowledge never would have been discovered if people had not set themselves the task to understand what the theory is about? Same with ethics for the same reason.”²

It is worth nothing too that Mack's claim that for Randians, “one's ultimate affections make the objects of those affections ultimately valuable” (14) omits from consideration that, for Rand & Co., it isn't any affection but a basic choice, a fundamental and first act of will or decision to live, that picks the goal of one's human life as an ultimate value. The only alternative to this is *not to live a life at all*.

(This would amount to the choice to opt and fade out of existence, although it wouldn't need to amount to a decision to die at the moment when the choice is being made. Indeed, one reason moral judgments tend to apply to everyone is that few make the choice, be it explicitly or implicitly, to cease to exist in any consistent, committed fashion and, instead, tend to vacillate—sometimes over a life time—between wanting to live a human life and not wanting to do so. These choices, like many we make for which we are held responsible, need not be made self-consciously or with deliberation, so long as they are made intentionally.)

Also, Mack speaks of ultimate value, which is chosen and, by his lights, therefore subjective. He does not differentiate this from the issue of the ultimate moral value for a person that may or may not be objective. In other words, it may well be true that living a fulfilling life is of great value and that this is what is acknowledged in the choice to live (*à la* Rand & Co.). But whether this ultimate great value will have any moral significance for someone may well depend on whether one makes the choice to live. In other words, whether one is doing the right or wrong thing by acting in certain ways may well depend on whether one has chosen to live *qua* human being. The actual value of living such a life may indeed be possible to establish or be demonstrated independently of someone's making the choice to live such a life. But whether one is acting rightly or wrongly may not be demonstrable without it being the case that this is what one has chosen to do, namely, to live (as a human being). That is what the choice to live puts on the table, as it were, a commitment to live in a certain sort of way rather than not to live at all or at least not to live *qua* human being.

Now let me turn to a final issue I will explore in Mack's paper. It is interesting that Mack would focus a good deal on the topic of parasitism. Rand's use of "parasite" seems to invite trouble because, strictly speaking, parasites are not aggressors like thieves—they merely live off what others may well quite willingly, albeit perhaps stupidly, provide (or perhaps would just discard if it weren't for the parasite's use for it). Rand also called such people "moochers." But is Rand being literal? I doubt it. By using the term "parasite" in characteriz-

ing those who refuse to produce for their own lives but leach off others', she is suggesting the kind of life that is inept because it is dependent on what others routinely do for themselves and needs to be taken from them. She is focusing on those who fail to produce but take from others who do. She is, in other words, talking about thieves or looters. And at this stage she is identifying this kind of life as impoverished. It is irrational in not being well founded, well supported, and thus properly prudent.³

Okay, so what? Mack counters this by noting that parasitism may well be rational for some. Does he mean that to be parasitic may be a well-calculated strategy for some people? But a parasitic strategy could be well-calculated without it being the case that parasitism is rational in another sense, namely, a wise way to live. Mack's rational parasite may not be so rational, after all.

Can Basic Rights Be Derived from Egoist Ethics?

Mack also has another, far more substantive objection, namely, that for Rand no case can be made against theft since theft does violence against another and it may in some circumstances be rational for one to do this. An egoist such as Rand may not be able to ward off such conduct by construing it as unproblematically irrational. That's where the phrase "rational parasitism" gets its sting. Mack uses it to indicate a set of counterexamples to the Randian allegation that it is rational to be productive rather than parasitical. Mack is suggesting again something he has stressed in other works, namely, that unless we defend the view that others may not be treated as unwilling means to one's ends, in addition to the view that human beings ought to act rationally, we have no case against parasitism—it could indeed be rational to be a parasite or thief or a rights violator in general.

This is a complicated matter with which Mack has been wrestling for some time. He holds, basically, that merely showing that one ought to act rationally, even productively, does not show that one ought not to take what belongs to others (or, putting it more neutrally, what comprises others—e.g., their labor—and what they have

produced). So, it would appear, unless one establishes the existence of individual human rights to life, liberty, property, etc., in addition to having shown the truth of rational egoism, one hasn't given adequate reasons why a rational egoist should not murder, steal, etc. I have dealt with this problem elsewhere and will not revisit it here (see Machan 1992). (Mack himself only intimates it, in any case, rather than focuses on it in any detail.) Still, a couple of remarks may be worthwhile concerning Mack's use of his set of counterexamples. For example, Mack does not fully address whether it is rational for one to steal as opposed to produce; he leaves off after arguing for its plausibility. He suggests that a "rational" strategy of parasitism—*qua* stealing, robbing, embezzling, etc.—could achieve for someone the same material end that being productive routinely would.

However, would it not be most reasonable to hold that it is better for a person to be productive than to be parasitic (that is, than to be a thief)? For one, a thief's exertion of effort to obtain from unwilling others what could be produced has a serious downside. It is that when one steals, one invites and can reasonably expect resistance to one's efforts—either right away or later. So not only does one have to exert the effort to obtain something from another but also to prepare to and then actually resist retaliation. So it doesn't seem like a net advantage to a person to be a thief rather than to be productive. That it *might be* is not an argument here—lots of things might be that routinely aren't and thus ought not to be counted on as the right course to take.

But there is more. Again, the term "rational" in "rational parasite" seems to trade on an ambiguity. Sometimes "rational" is used in the Aristotelian sense whereby a rational person is one who seeks wisdom by attempting to understand the world for what it is, including its laws and principles. Sometimes "rational" is used in the more prominent modern or Cartesian sense that to reason is to calculate, to do the numbers. In the second sense, parasitism may well be rational on some rare occasions but it is doubtful that it is rational in the former sense. A thief fails to acknowledge that something belongs to another, not to him. So he fails to deal with the world as it is, substituting for facts the states he would desire to be

facts. In this sense, “rational parasitism” is an oxymoron. But does this not presuppose the very thing that Mack claims needs to be established independently?

If by “presupposes” is meant that I take it is irrational (in an Aristotelian sense of that term) to believe (or act as if one believed) both that other human beings lack *human* rights while one has them, and it is rational to hold that one has human rights (in virtue of being human), and that insofar as others are human, they also have such rights, then this is wrong. That is not a presupposition in any question-begging sense but a thesis that is nearly fundamental, given the laws of conceptual inference and the meaning of the concept “human.” It may be useful in this regard to consider the point that we are often urged to act thoughtfully, considerately. To do so would promote respect for others in the sense due them depending on their relationship to us; one’s acting thoughtfully toward one’s children would be different from doing so toward strangers. Yet, there is a relationship between oneself and strangers, namely, that of being human. And that alone makes it rational to show regard for their basic human rights. So, while rights ought to be protected by those who have them, they ought also to be respected by their fellow human beings.⁴

So, the idea that the Randian ethics of reason—that is, the Objectivist ethics according to which the use of reason is the primary virtue—can fend off parasitic conduct in general (with some logical possibilities, whatever they may be, not fully disposed of) has more going for it than Mack suggests.

Rasmussen and Den Uyl on the Randian Choice to Live

Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl have taken the Randian approach to be inadequate, as well, in several discussions—most recently in Rasmussen’s 2002 *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* paper. They hold, unlike Rand did, that for every person to live their human life is a moral imperative even if one does not make the choice to do so. They hold that the value of human life—or of a successful, happy

human life—is an independent fact of the world, regardless of what an acting human agent chooses. They are what Rand would dub *intrinsicists* about this—that the (ultimate) value at issue for us is intrinsic to—or innate or inherent in—a successful human life, whether or not one chooses to live. By Rand’s understanding, such an account of values is untenable. Her solution is her nuanced conception of “objectivity” (see note 2 below).

As far as what is the most serious problem with Rand’s metaethics, Rasmussen (2002, 73) puts it this way: “From the perspective of morality, it seems that . . . the choice to live is ultimately optional or arbitrary.”⁵ This then once again is the allegation of dreaded subjectivism, surely an especially telling charge if it could be maintained successfully. (It calls to mind how anarcho-libertarians routinely and with a special sting dub fellow minarchists as statists, or how conservatives talk of abortions as the killing of unborn children.)

For Rand, who regards her account of morality as “objectivist,” not “intrinsicist,” the value of a successful *human life* is of value to the individual who lives it. So, if no such life is in play, so to speak, no such value for the individual exists. For Rand, the absence of that basic choice to live amounts to the non-initiation of a human kind of living—as distinct from merely automatically proceeding, non-volitional physical living processes—and thus fails to introduce the moral dimension into one’s life. Only *in the course of one’s life* can morality matter, and since not choosing to live absents one from such a course, there can be no moral requirement that applies to one in such a case.

As to the charge that this renders the choice arbitrary, it would only be so if the value chosen were one among others in a kind of smorgasbord of options. Yet this value isn’t one among several possible ultimate values. Once one has made the choice to live on, just one ultimate value is possible. (Rand may have difficulties in making this out but it is her intent.)

I have already noted that like Mack, Rasmussen and Den Uyl in their several works—and Rasmussen in the paper under discussion—maintain that not only does this view of Rand’s fail to be true but it actually commits her to a metaethical position she claims over and

over again to deplore, namely, subjectivism. Since the ultimate value in Rand's position of living *qua* human being—and I leave aside for now whether it is living *per se* or living *qua* human being that is at issue in her position—only exists by virtue of a human individual's ("optional or arbitrary") choice to pursue it, that ultimate value is then dependent upon that individual's choice and has no independent, objective reality. Accordingly, only Rasmussen and Den Uyl's reconceived version of ethics akin to but not exactly as Rand proposed has a chance to escape the dreaded charge of subjectivism.

Is this correct? Can Rand's "If, then . . ." moral position remain among those approaches to ethics that can legitimately be construed as objectivist?

To reiterate, in Rand's view the "If, then . . ." proposition is one that supposedly rests on a fundamental, inescapable and exclusive alternative between the choice to live or not to live. Nothing in-between is possible. A human being who has chosen not to live supposedly lacks any need for morality since the function of morality, for Rand, like the function of hard-wired instincts for nonhuman animals, is to guide one to successful living (be that cashed out as human survival or as survival *qua* human being).

To put it another way, apart from the implicitly or explicitly chosen goal to live—I leave aside a discussion of which such a choice would be—there is no place for morality or ethics, or so Rand would have it. By Rand's account, it seems to me, the choice of the goal to live could not be self-consciously or deliberately made since that would presuppose that the choice to think had been made prior to the choice to live, which seems incoherent. Instead, these are choices made simultaneously; they are two sides of the same coin, as it were. The details here are, of course, rather tricky and would need to be developed in a full discussion of the Randian position. Since there is no other alternative to living but not living, the choice to live (naturally) necessarily introduces a moral code, namely, the code Rand lays out in her Objectivist ethics. (I am not here concerned with whether that ethics is indeed the right one for human beings.)

Let me stress that in a certain respect the fact of one's having chosen to live, no less so than of having the chance of making that

choice, is indeed arbitrary or optional. I live and you live but neither of us had to live. Our lives are here, for lack of a better term, contingently, not necessarily. Had it not been for what our parents decided to do, which itself may well have been something quite arbitrary or optional, we would not exist.

Now, once we do exist, whether we proceed to embark upon a human life or let it go by making no effort to keep it going, that, too, may well be termed “arbitrary or optional,” a contingent fact about the world, one that we bring about but didn’t have to. The vital issue, however, is whether once that effort has been made, has one taken up a task that requires acting by certain objectively true principles, the principles of morality or ethics?

Rasmussen, it seems, would want to deny Rand’s claim that one makes a choice to live or chooses, instead, to live. Rasmussen (2002, 78) states, “strictly speaking, not choosing [to live] is not a choice.” He thinks Rand is confused because

[i]t is not clear that Rand means what she literally says—that is, that she means “not choosing to live” as opposed to “choosing not to live.” If she does, then there would be no reason to specify the choice in terms of life, for it would be choosing as opposed to not choosing that would make the principles of a rational ethics applicable, not the object of this choice. (79)

Yet, the two are intimately—one might even wish to say, ontologically and logically—connected. Since taking the option of choosing is just the sort of option that a living human being can take, to choose is the same as to choose to live, at least at this fundamental level. (Just compare, as a somewhat analogous case, if I decide to jump off a cliff, I decide to plunge to the ground below the cliff, so the decision to jump and to plunge to the ground are inseparable.) I do not see that Rasmussen has shown anything flawed in the way Rand puts the matter. (It is often the case that when people say “I choose,” they mean “I select from among several alternatives.” But sometimes it could also mean that “I choose” means “I take the

initiative, the first step.”)

Now, how can this way of working out Rand’s position answer the dreaded charge of subjectivism? One might try to answer it by calling to mind that the choice—taking the initiative—to live is a fundamental and exclusive choice—a *bona fide* initiative. The making of it unavoidably commits one to the moral code that makes such living successful. Other options are not possible, yet one need not have taken the initiative, so it is in one sense arbitrary or optional.

Subjectivist ethics, by contrast, typically allow that the ultimate value to be pursued in life could be any one of several alternatives. In short, the existence of the value of one’s human life is itself subjective, under a subjectivist ethical viewpoint, since it could be something other than whatever the individual does in fact select, depending entirely on whether he or she selects it. One might select as one’s “ultimate” value to live like a mouse or mystic or tree worshiper or something even more restricted and unnatural to a human individual such as a fabulously skilled thief.

Rand, by contrast, does not hold that these options are open to human beings as fundamental alternatives. Only the rational option of either living a successful human life—presumably one guided by rational thought and issuing, thus, in rational conduct—or nothing else to do is available for someone on that fundamental level of choice. The other options—if one can even call them that—aren’t really options in any coherent sense; they are impossible to carry off successfully, although they are attempted often enough.

Does this ward off the dreaded charge of subjectivism? In one respect it does, since for subjectivists in ethics it is routinely possible to select any number of possible ultimate values. And for Rand this is definitely not the case. But perhaps the dreaded charge is that a particular version of subjectivism still plagues Rand’s position, namely, that the ultimate value of leading a successful human life is dependent on the choice of an individual and isn’t “out there,” independent of this individual’s choice. Yet this kind of subjectivism has none of the liabilities of subjectivist ethics, namely, that people can simply invent moralities right and left, to their heart’s content, by choosing any one of a number of different and mutually contradictory ultimate values

to pursue.

So, one reason Rand might give for rejecting the dreaded charge is that all that's needed for an ethics to be objective is for it to provide right answers to the question, "How should I *live*?" It is this question, as noted already, that gives rise to morality, after all, at least as she understands the matter. To repeat, whereas other animals possess instincts to guide them to success in their lives, we do not have any and need a code of ethics. So, once one has chosen to live—all the time assuming there is that choice for every human being to make—the matter of how to do it becomes relevant. And as Rand sees it, there do exist such right answers—although they may be individual-specific, not because of some alleged subjectivity but because of the particular configuration of an individual's identity and thus what is needed for his or her successful living of his or her life.

One motivation for Rand's approach is akin to that of many classical liberal ethical subjectivists, namely, to avoid embracing the view that ethics may be enforced. Subjectivists of the routine variety seem, however, to fail to succeed in this objective because for them someone could simply (subjectively) select for themselves the value of coercing others. In Rand's case, however, this would appear not to be an available option for anyone, given that by her lights the choice to live ushers in the moral code in terms of which coercion is morally wrong. (I leave aside whether she makes this case successfully—Mack, for example, denies it and claims that aside from an ethics of the sort Rand tries to defend, it is also necessary to give an additional argument for someone being wrong to coerce others, for others having inviolable rights to life, liberty, etc.)

So, then, is the dreaded charge of subjectivism—in the form in which it is indeed dreaded by all those who seek to identify a moral code for human beings that isn't optional (that is, wherein what one ought to do isn't up to what the agent happens to want or desire or wish)—successfully repelled via the Randian type of "subjectivism"? I believe it is.

How to Think About Randian Metaethics

A (living) human being is committed to abide by the morality that guides him or her to succeeding as a human individual, one whose fundamental and distinctive mode of conduct must be rational. We might then call this metaethical view, following Rand, not “subjectivist” but “objectively conditional”—“If one is alive voluntarily, one is then committed to acting so and so.”

It is in her essay, “Causality versus Duty” (in Rand 1982),⁶ that Rand calls such statements “conditional imperatives,” along the lines of Kant’s *The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Ethics*. Rand advocates conditional imperatives, which are identical to Kant’s hypothetical imperatives, which he dubbed “pragmatic,” because they have to do with the “skill in the choice of means to one’s own greatest well-being” (Kant 1938, 32–33). As Roger Bissell notes, “Rand justly lambastes modern, anti-ideological pragmatism, while unjustly ignoring Kant’s original usage of the term—and she justly lambastes Kant, pillorying him for his categorical imperatives in regard to what is right and moral (X is good or right ‘just because’), while unjustly using without acknowledgment his conditional imperatives, in regard to what is efficacious in achieving one’s rational purposes (X is good or right in order to attain your chosen values).”⁷

It may be helpful here to model Rand’s metaethics on a more familiar though limited moral commitment. When one takes up a profession or an office, one makes a commitment—takes an oath, as it were, explicitly or implicitly—and because of that commitment, one can be held responsible to live by the code of ethics applicable to that profession or office. Without the oath or commitment—no choice to embark on this kind of life—no obligations follow. (Consider someone who is conscripted or enslaved—no obligations can be generated from such a state; Rand seems to have seen the entirety of morality along similar lines—first one needs to get on board, voluntarily, and then the obligations follow.)

Moreover, prior to having made the choice to live and thus to think, as only a human being will, it is hard to imagine how one might have any moral responsibilities before this choice has been made.

One is, in this primordial state, unaware of anything, let alone of what one ought to be doing.

True enough, in law, ignorance is no excuse. That's because once one functions at the level of a citizen, one will have committed oneself to the task of learning what one needs to know so as to proceed properly. But in the preconscious state that one is in before having made the choice to live and think, no commitment has been made. Failure to commence with thinking may be rare but might in part account for, among other impairments in children, certain cases of autism, even sudden infant deaths.

It is important to recognize that this basic choice isn't anything like other choices, which are in effect selections made from alternatives one is well aware of.⁸ The basic choice, in contrast, is a kind of "on/off" choice, rather than selection from several options that one consciously faces! The choice to live is the fundamental commitment that sets into motion the process of coming to be aware of what is needed for one to live and live properly.

It is a category mistake, as well, to hold someone responsible for something that he or she has no way of knowing whether one ought to do or not to do.

Notes

1. See also Machan 1992.

2. J. Roger Lee, via e-mail, 29 November 2002, 8:01:56 PM. For a very informative discussion of Rand's conception of objectivity, see Raibley 2002. For more on the nature of Randian objectivity, see Allan Gotthelf, "Ayn Rand on Concepts, Definitions, and Essences," and James G. Lennox, "Ayn Rand on Concepts, Context, and The Advance of Science," papers presented at the meeting of the Ayn Rand Society, American Philosophical Association, 28 December 2003, Washington, D. C.

3. There is a seriously troubling Randian idea we might also have considered, namely, that unearned wealth and benefits are bad, morally unacceptable. Yet, a considerable measure of what renders our lives interesting, enjoyable, and sometimes luxurious, comes from attributes we happen to have or others happen to give us without any effort on our part to attain or produce them. We didn't earn our health, parents, genetic pedigree, raw sex appeal or being surrounded with congenial company and lovely sights but we routinely benefit from these and mostly welcome the benefit (unless it begins to spoil us). There is, in short, nothing morally amiss in accepting the benefits of luck or good fortune.

4. It is this that renders the idea of "animal rights" a category mistake, since

animals aren't equipped to respect rights. The fact that while asleep or in infancy neither are humans is a sophistical objection—the norm is the adult state and we ought to extend to young, invalid or defective instances what we can of the norm. See Machan 2004.

5. I must admit to a bit of puzzlement about why neither Rasmussen nor Mack chose to address my admittedly brief yet telling treatment of their concern in my book, *Capitalism and Individualism: Reframing the Argument for the Free Society* (Machan 1990). In that work, in connection with my Randian treatment of value theory, I say the following:

It might be replied here that, in the end, even the choice to carry on with one's human life, possibly the ultimate source of objective value, is merely an arbitrary one. Most folks want to live, but some do not. We cannot establish the rightness of the former and the wrongness of the latter. So we are left with a hypothetical standard of value in any case, which is tantamount to subjectivism. (64)

This is just the point both Rasmussen and Mack make about the alleged subjectivism of Rand's metaethics. And I address it this way in that work:

This objection fails to appreciate the context of value concerns. Value concerns arise only in the context of life, never in the context of death. Death could not be of value to anything because valuing beings are necessarily live beings. Dead beings, as far as we can make sense of it in rational, practical terms, do nothing, including choose to value something in relation to their death. It is only in connection with life that values make sense in the first place, so this is not a hypothetical but an objective, although not an intrinsic, account of values after all. (64–65)

Given my involvement in working through Rand's ideas, informed by works both within classic and contemporary philosophical metaethics, with several published pieces in various mainstream forums, I would have thought a bit of attention to how I have attempted to show that Rand's ideas have merit would have been warranted.

In any case, in this discussion, I offer a more detailed treatment of the points Rasmussen and Mack make.

6. Rasmussen, by the way, claims that in view of her rejection of duty-based ethics or deontologism, Rand is a consequentialist. But, as he well knows, there is the alternative of a teleological metaethics that Rand embraces.

7. Roger Bissell, via e-mail, 2 December 2002, 9:00:00 PM.

8. The concept "choose" is ambiguous—it can mean, as noted already, *to initiate a process or to select from alternatives*. It is initiation that's at issue in this discussion. For more, see Machan 2000.

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