

Ethics

Discussion

Rejoinder to Robert Hartford, “Objectivity and the Proof of Egoism”
(Spring 2007)

Rand’s Metaethics

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Man must choose his actions, values and goals by the standard of that which is proper to man—in order to achieve, maintain, fulfill and enjoy that ultimate value, that end in itself, which is his own life.

— Ayn Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics” (Rand 1964, 25)

This rejoinder¹ will proceed in a point-by-point manner. These points will not be developed in detail. The points in Part I simply serve to remind the reader of the aim of my two previous essays, “Rand on Obligation and Value” (Rasmussen 2002) and “Regarding Choice and the Foundation of Morality: Reflections on Rand’s Ethics” (Rasmussen 2006), and to set the context for my remarks in Part II.² There I direct my points at Robert Hartford’s analysis and assumptions. However, I do not attempt to provide an overall evaluation of his “proof” of egoism.³ I consider it only insofar as it relates to what I have argued.

I

1. My concern has not been with proving egoism. My concern has been limited to two issues: (1) whether “the official” interpretation of the so-called basic choice to live can provide a justification for how one ought to conduct oneself and (2) whether Rand’s metaethical views might not be better understood and defended if she is seen as advancing what Douglas J. Den Uyl and I called in *The Philosophic Thought of Ayn Rand* “the Aristotelian alternative” (Den Uyl and Rasmussen 1984, 10).

2. Specifically, I am concerned with whether what Rand called “Man’s Life” in “This Is John Galt Speaking” in *Atlas Shrugged* (Rand 1957, 1014) or “man’s survival *qua* man” in “The Objectivist Ethics” (Rand 1964, 24) is, on the one hand, the ultimate end of human conduct and standard for moral evaluation *only if* it is the object of human choice/recognition. Or if, on the other hand, it is the ultimate end and standard because of what a human being *is* regardless of whether it is chosen/recognized.

3. The issue here is not whether choice/recognition is necessary for the achievement of this end or following this standard. The question is, to repeat, whether “Man’s Life” (or “man’s survival *qua* man”) is the end of human conduct and standard of morality *even if no one chooses it or recognizes it*. Does our nature as human beings provide us with an ultimate end or standard for morality? Is there some ontological basis, something about us—indeed something that even sets the context for the use of logic—that justifies the basic choice to live?

4. As Professor Mack (2003, 61 n. 15) has put it: Do we have a “categorical end”? Mack, Den Uyl, and I hold that we do, and the “official position,” as represented by Leonard Peikoff, Allan Gotthelf, and others, holds that we do not or, even if we do, that it has no moral import when it comes to the basic choice to live.

5. To hold that “Man’s Life” (or “man’s survival *qua* man”) is a categorical or natural⁴ end does not mean or imply that ethics is based on a “categorical imperative,” however. Rather, ethics is based on a hypothetical (or conditional) imperative. Yet, since “Man’s Life” (or “man’s survival *qua* man”) is one’s categorical or natural end, and since this is not a matter of choice or recognition,⁵ it is an *assertoric* hypothetical imperative.⁶

6. According to “the official” view of Rand, either we have no categorical or natural ends apart from our choice or, even if we do, they do not provide a basis for why we ought to choose living as a human being. Ethics is based on a *problematic* hypothetical imperative.⁷ There are no moral obligations unless one first chooses to live. (This claim I have called “voluntarism.”)

7. Another way of stating the issue, then, that divides the neo-Aristotelian view of Rand from the so-called official view is this: Given that for Rand the fundamental ethical imperative must be

hypothetical, which view of this imperative will make her account of ethics more plausible? Problematic or assertoric?

II

1. With regard to the beginning of the second sentence of the third paragraph in Hartford's reply (Hartford 2007, 291)—“That also reflects the importance of the choice, but assumes the choice to live to be valid, begs the question, and avoids effort at proof”—the reference for “That” is not clear. I cannot tell, nor do I think can any other reader, what the reference is. Thus, I cannot comment about what follows in this paragraph. There are too many possible references to consider.

2. Hartford notes that Rand says her view of morality is one “which can be proved by means of logic” (291). However, this does not mean or imply that she seeks to prove her morality by logic *alone*. There can be ontological presuppositions that logic uses as well.

3. Hartford notes “the need to reformulate the ‘choice to live’ so that its meaning is clear and so that it can support philosophical analysis” (292). AMEN.

4. Hartford thinks that a better formulation of the choice to live is “the voluntary *acceptance and use* of the principle” (292) that one's life is the goal of one's actions. Yet, there are some important questions about this formulation. What does “voluntary” mean here? Does it mean simply that one is not coerced? Does it mean that there is no reason for it? If there is a reason, what is the source of the reason? Is one's life the goal merely because one accepts and uses it, or does one accept and use one's life as the goal because there is an ontological context in which acceptance and use operate? Is there something that acceptance and use are naturally *for*? Ought one accept and use one's life as one's goal? On the other hand, are such acceptance and use premoral? It does not seem that this “better formulation” gets us very far.

5. “Logic requires the coupling of ‘acceptance and use’” (292), claims Hartford. This depends. If logic is a purely formal enterprise, it can only show us that if we are logical we cannot affirm both *p* and non-*p*,⁸ but this does not show us that we *ought* to be logical. Alternatively, if logic is an *organon* that serves the end of knowledge, which is one of the constitutive ends of “Man's Life,” then one ought

to be logical because it is, in effect, part of what is involved in one's categorical or natural end. Thus, one ought to accept the principle of noncontradiction (PNC) and not engage in contradictions. The coupling of acceptance and use of the PNC is required only if logic ultimately serves our categorical or natural end—only then is there no separation of knowledge from conduct, reason from desire.

6. "Holding one's own life as the motive and goal of one's action is . . . the acceptance of a single foundational principle" (293), states Hartford. However, the basic issue for all of these discussions over the last few years has been whether this acceptance is premoral or not. Hartford needs either to address this issue or to show there is something wrong with the question. He does neither.

7. Under the heading "The Meaning of 'Proof of Egoism'" (293), Hartford (a) quotes me out of context and (b) fails to grasp the point I make.

(a) In the second paragraph, Hartford points out quite rightly that my claiming that there are no good reasons for holding that moral choices are for anything other than living is not the same as proving that they are. However, I was discussing the best way to interpret Rand's view in light of Professor Fred D. Miller, Jr.'s paper, "Ayn Rand as Aristotelian: Values and Happiness." I was not trying to establish at that instance the truth of this interpretation.

(b) In the third paragraph, Hartford takes my claim that if logic does not serve the natural end of "Man's Life," then a logical "ought" is separated from a moral "ought" to imply that I must use a moral "ought" as the foundation of morality and that I am guilty of arguing in a circle. Yet, to say that one cannot ultimately separate a logical "ought" from a moral "ought" does not imply that they are not distinct, and being distinct is all that is required to avoid circularity.⁹ The aim of logic and the aim of human choice are distinct, but as indicated in point II.5 above, they are still connected. Hartford fails to appreciate the Aristotelian insight that things can be distinct without being separate.

8. Hartford claims that I assume what I am supposed to prove when I note, "[t]he mature state of a human being—an individual's self-perfection or good—is the natural end or *telos* of human choice" (Rasmussen 2006, 313).¹⁰ Except for some questionable comments about teleology, which I will consider shortly, Hartford really does not

explain why he thinks I assume that which is to be proved.

9. To what does Hartford object in my account of an assertoric hypothetical imperative? It seems that he is objecting to these two ideas: (a) that the moral good for a human being is determined by what the nature of a human being requires and (b) that what is good for a human being determines what a human being ought to do. I plead guilty to holding these two ideas, and I cannot understand any account of Rand's ethics that would not involve these ideas as well.

10. Rand's ethics is a naturalistic ethics because what is good is explained by reference to human nature—that is the point for the “qua” in the locution “man's survival *qua* man”—and the basic reason one ought to do something is because it achieves or expresses what is one's good. When Rand (1982, 114) argues in “Causality Versus Duty” that “duty” is an anti-concept and that it should not be confused with obligation, she is saying that obligation (and indeed ethics or morality) is not *sui generis* and that obligation must be explained in terms of something else. Of course, if the something else is going to explain obligation, then it must enable one to reason from an “is” to an “ought.” Thus, there must be a sense in which the “is” of human nature carries with it what amounts to an “ought.” What is that sense?

11. This sense is found in Rand's fundamental metaethical claim in “The Objectivist Ethics”: “The fact that a living entity *is*, determines what it *ought* to do” (Rand 1964, 17). Since human beings are living things, what a human being *is* determines what a human being ought to do.¹¹ The source of the *ought* is found in what is *good* for a human being. What is good for a human being is what enables a human being to live as a human being (that is, to live fully or maturely¹²) and what is good for a human being is what is *choice-worthy*, and this is fundamentally what one ought to do. No stronger sense of “ought” or “obligatory” is required.

12. This account of the good and the obligatory for a human being is based on two ontological facts: (a) that human beings have a nature and (b) that fulfilling that nature is their ultimate value or end or goal. (a) provides the basis for determining what is good for a human being and (b) provides the context in which human actions occur. Together (a) and (b) amount to a natural teleology, which for Rand has a biocentric basis.¹³

An *ultimate* value is that final goal or end to which all lesser goals are the means—and it sets the standard by which all lesser goals are *evaluated*. An organism's life is its *standard of value*: that which furthers its life is the *good*, that which threatens it is the *evil*. . . . It is only an ultimate goal, an *end in itself*, that makes the existence of values possible. Metaphysically, *life* is the only phenomenon that is an end in itself: a value gained and kept by a constant process of action. (17)

One cannot talk adequately of what the end of human life is apart from a consideration of what is good for a human being, and one cannot talk adequately of what is good for a human being apart from the end of human life. Hartford (2007, 295–97) attempts to do both, however, when he speaks of values apart from goals and when he claims that apart from the final goal of life “value” means “a beneficial condition for its own life that an organism produces through its own action” (296). To attempt to talk of values apart from the ultimate goal of life is to beg the question as to what is good for a human being. To attempt to talk of what is good for a human being apart from the ultimate goal of life is to fail to provide any basis for pursuing that good.¹⁴ Either way, Hartford commits the naturalistic fallacy.

13. Hartford says, “The ‘natural end’ of some diseases is death” (296). This statement reifies “disease” by treating it as an entity. A disease is not a reality that has needs, functions, or ends. Diseases have no natural function, no *telos*. They are not for the sake of anything. Rather, they are conditions that a living thing suffers when its needs, functions, and ends are not achieved or maintained. Ultimately, diseases are what prevent the achievement and enjoyment of life. In addition, this statement reveals a gross misunderstanding of “end.” An “end” is that-for-the-sake-of which an activity takes place. It does not mean in this context the last action or event in time. Hence, death is not an end in the requisite sense. Furthermore, death is not a positive way of being, but the privation of life in an entity that once was alive. Death itself has no required actions or needs. It cannot be a natural end.¹⁵

14. Hartford claims that by emphasizing natural ends I blur “the distinction between values and goals” (296). This is not true; what is

good for a living thing (Hartford's sense of the term "value") and what is the goal of a living thing are clearly distinguished. However, the point is that they are not separated or treated as if one can exist without the other.

15. Hartford insists that he will use the term "value" to mean only what is beneficial for (that is, good for) a living thing. This not only is different from Rand's claim that "'Value' is that which one acts to gain and/or keep," but it also ignores the ontological context in which "value" in her sense develops—that is, "value to *whom* and for *what*?" (Rand 1964, 15–16). Finally, there is a perfectly good term available to convey the meaning of an end or goal (that is, "value" in the sense in which Rand employs this term) that is good for a living thing. This is "valuable." By treating a value as what is valuable (that is, as an end worthy of being valued), Hartford tries to achieve by definition what he needs to establish by way of argument.

16. "[T]his paper will not use the term 'ultimate value.' That term confuses the final goal of life with the values that are the means to achieving the goal of life," states Hartford (2007, 296). Alternatively, Rand states, "[a]n *ultimate* value is that final goal or end to which all lesser goals are the means. . . . An organism's life is its *standard of value* . . ." (Rand 1964, 17). These two statements clearly conflict, and so Hartford is not offering an interpretation of Rand but his own position. There is nothing wrong with Hartford doing so, but he should make it clear that this is what he is doing. Furthermore, he should not suggest that understanding "Man's Life" (or "man's survival *qua* man") as a categorical or natural end is something alien to Rand. Indeed, it is the most natural way of reading her.

17. Hartford notes that "Rand claims that the normative is 'derived from and dependent on' the cognitive" and "[i]f that is true, one will have normative judgments that go 'all the way down'" (2007, 299). I agree with this, and this is in fact the position that Den Uyl, Mack,¹⁶ and I hold. But this is not a very fundamental observation by Hartford, because what one needs to know is just what is cognized. What is it about reality, particularly human beings, that shows that normative judgments that go "all the way down"¹⁷ can be true or false? This issue distinguishes the "neo-Aristotelian" reading of Rand from the "official" one.

18. I claim that Peikoff is contradicting himself when he morally

condemns those who choose not to live and at the same time contends that the choice to live is premoral. In response, Hartford states that sometimes “the choice to live” needs to be modified by “to prove,” “proof of,” “to implement,” or “implementation of.” He then notes, “It is not at all contradictory to ‘condemn morally the failure to implement the choice to live’ and on the other hand to assert that ‘proof of the choice to live precedes morality’” (302). First, this is not what Peikoff and the other advocates of the premoral-choice view state. Second, this is not the issue. Of course, proof of why one ought to choose to live logically precedes any evaluation of one’s choosing to live or choosing not to live. However, in what does that proof consist?

Notes

1. For assistance and suggestions, I would like to thank Douglas J. Den Uyl and Chris Matthew Sciabarra.

2. These remarks presuppose what I have developed in these two articles.

3. This task I leave for someone else.

4. That is to say, it is our end because of our nature as human beings—specifically, because we *are* living beings and because we *are* living beings of a certain kind or type. We have a certain *form* of life.

5. According to this neo-Aristotelian view, human choice does not set the context in which it operates. It operates within a biocentric context that sets its parameters. Human choice is understood in terms of a human being’s potentiality for his or her mature state. Though an individual human being can choose not to live as a human being, an individual cannot choose not to be a human being. One cannot choose to have some other ultimate end than a human one. If one fails to think/focus (which is often thought to be how the basic choice to live is concretely exercised and experienced in the lives of individuals), then one remains human but existing in an unfulfilled manner—stuck in an ontological limbo until and unless one exercises one’s mind.

6. Since “Man’s Life” is your ultimate end, then you ought to achieve the virtues and goods that express it.

7. If you choose “Man’s Life” as your ultimate end, then you ought to achieve the virtues and goods that express it.

8. I will ignore the issue of alternative logics. I will simply say that the principle of noncontradiction is a fundamental metalogical principle—in fact, it might be better to say it is a meta-metalogical principle.

9. See points II.9–14. Further, this issue touches upon the old charge often leveled at a deductive argument—namely, that it is either guilty of a *petitio principii*, because it packs the conclusion into its premises, or that it is guilty of a *non sequitur*, because its premises are insufficient to support its conclusion. For a classic reply to this charge and related issues, see Parker and Veatch 1959, 247–79.

10. When quoting me, Hartford omitted the subject of this sentence. I have

added it here.

11. An implicit premise here is that to exist is to be something, that existence *is* identity.

12. I hasten to note that maturity is not necessarily the same thing as aging. Consider the expression: “Some people do not grow up; they just grow old.”

13. She does not think there is any teleological principle operating in inanimate nature or on a cosmic scale.

14. The question remains: “Why ought one pursue what is beneficial for one’s life?” As I have indicated in my two previous articles, and in point II.5, saying that such a question involves a contradiction—be it semantic or performatory—does not show that one ought not to engage in contradictions. At this basic level, one is asking what it is that bridges what Hartford calls “cognitive” and “normative” actions (that is, what Aristotelians would call speculative and practical wisdom). If the choice to live is premoral, or if the choice to live is simply part of a problematic hypothetical imperative, then there is no ultimate justification for the claim that one ought not to engage in contradictions. Logic alone cannot suffice. Deeper premises from philosophical anthropology are needed.

15. To say this does not imply, however, that the virus that may be precipitating the disease does not have an end. “Disease” itself is a relational term and cannot be understood apart from the ends of the entities involved. An alien discovering micro-organisms in one’s body would not know by that mere fact whether one was infected with a disease or not. Further, to say that death cannot be a natural end does not mean that one could not choose death as one’s end. Indeed, there can be many choices involved in determining how to cease living.

16. For Mack, the function of valuing is to attain the valuing entity’s *well-being*, not to attain the valuing entity’s *survival* (Mack 2003, 13). See also Rasmussen and Den Uyl 2005, 111–52.

17. This is to say, the judgment of the choice to live or not to live.

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