

## Ethics

### Discussion

Reply to Tibor R. Machan, “Rand and Choice” (Spring 2006),  
Eric Mack, “More Problematic Arguments in Randian Ethics” (Spring 2006),  
and Douglas B. Rasmussen, “Regarding Choice and the Foundation of  
Morality: Reflections on Rand’s Ethics” (Spring 2006)

# Objectivity and the Proof of Egoism

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Tibor R. Machan (2006) in his essay, “Rand and Choice,” states that “there has been a controversy about” the truth of “the ethical judgments that are contained and implied in [Rand’s metaethical and ethical positions]” (257). The Spring 2006 issue of *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* contains differing views of the controversy from Machan, Eric Mack, and Douglas B. Rasmussen.

Machan takes “the choice to live [as a] fundamental commitment” (271) and does not provide a proof of the validity of that choice. His focus on the “choice to live” as “a kind of ‘on/off’ choice” (271) and its characterization as “the first choice that brings morality into play” (258) reflects the importance of the choice but is too narrow for validation of the Objectivist ethics, especially in the context of competing ethical theories.

Rasmussen (2006), in “Regarding Choice and the Foundation of Morality: Reflections on Rand’s Ethics,” claims “an individual’s self-perfection or good—is the natural end or *telos* of human choice” (313). 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.

Mack (2006), in “More Problematic Arguments in Randian Ethics,” cites his earlier work (Mack 2003) and comes closest to Ayn Rand’s vision of “a morality which can be proved by means of logic, which can be demonstrated to be true and necessary” (Rand [1959]

1998). Mack provides a bridge “between factual claims and normative claims . . . between the descriptive and the prescriptive” (Mack 2003, 10). He analyzes the function of valuing and places it “*within* the supposed gap between the descriptive and the prescriptive” (10). He encourages other “friendly explications . . . perhaps with additional, unrecognized premises” that might lead to an “enlightening . . . philosophical argument” (11).

This response to the above papers accepts Mack’s challenge and includes, with respect to those papers, “additional, unrecognized premises.” It provides additional explication of “what bridges or fills in the alleged [factual-normative] gap” (10). It highlights differences with two of the papers and presents an alternative for validation of the truth of ethical egoism and Rand’s Objectivist version of that theory.

### **The Meaning of “The Choice to Live”**

The three papers focus on the status of “the choice to live” as the foundational principle of the Objectivist ethics. That seems reasonable since, as a novelist, Rand (1957, 936) stated that the Objectivist ethics “is contained in a single axiom: existence exists—and in a single choice: to live.” But as Nathaniel Branden (1998) has argued, that statement is “highly foreshortened” and requires analysis by scholars to make its meaning clear. Branden also relates a conversation he had with John Hospers in which Hospers said he doesn’t remember making the choice to live. Those comments illustrate the need to reformulate the “choice to live” so that its meaning is clear and so that it can support philosophical analysis.

What do people who are actually living life choose? They choose mental and physical actions that are constitutive of life. In light of those real world choices, a better philosopher’s formulation of the foundational principle is that the Objectivist ethics is contained in the voluntary *acceptance and use* of the principle of “hold[ing] [one’s] . . . own life as the motive and goal of [one’s] . . . action” (Rand 1957, 932).

Logic requires the coupling of “acceptance and use.” For example, to *accept* that 2 plus 2 is 4 and then to *use* 2 plus 2 is 5 when doing arithmetic violates the law of noncontradiction. “Acceptance and use” of the foundational principle highlights its cognitive and

normative aspects in a way that “the choice to live” does not. Acceptance of the principle is a cognitive judgment. Use of the principle is a normative commitment. Therefore, proof of the principle will bridge the factual-normative gap.

Holding one’s own life as the motive and goal of one’s action does “contain” Rand’s ethical theory. The principle is the standard for action because it implies that benefit to one’s life is the criterion for choosing action. The principle provides the purpose of action by implying that living one’s life is the ultimate goal of chosen action.

Holding one’s own life as the motive and goal of one’s action is a single choice in the sense that it is the acceptance of a single foundational principle, but it is a principle that is used innumerable times, implicitly or explicitly, as a person makes life-serving choices.

The reformulated form of the “choice to live” allows for more meaningful analysis as well as the possibility of proof. Proof is not provided by Machan’s view that acceptance of the principle is “a *basic* conditional value” (2006, 259) and that the alternative is not a “live [option]” (260) or by Rasmussen’s analysis that implicitly assumes the choice to live as valid.

## The Meaning of “Proof of Egoism”

Proof of a cognitive judgment requires demonstrating its truth by explicit logical means. To prove an ethical theory, its foundational principle must be proved and it must be shown that the principle logically supports validation of normative choices. To ask for a true ethical theory is to ask for that proof.

Rasmussen (2006, 318) sees “no good reason” for moral choices “being anything other than [for] the task of living.” Seeing “no good reason” for another interpretation is not the same as proof. Rasmussen also expresses concern that without acknowledging logic as serving “the natural end of human life and choice . . . there is a separation of the logical ‘ought’ from the moral ‘ought’” (2006, 317). In fact, that separation is *required* for *proof* of “the choice to live.” Logic prohibits use of the moral ‘ought’ in a proof of the foundation of morality.

Machan does not attempt proof. He asserts that to ask for reasons for making the choice “reveals a misunderstanding . . . . One either does or does not make [the choice]” (Machan 2006, 258). He

equivocates on the consequence of not making the choice, in one place saying that “the only alternative . . . is not to live a life at all” (260) and in another place saying that most people “tend to vacillate . . . between wanting to live a human life and not wanting to do so” (261). Machan’s statement that the choice to live is “the first choice that brings morality into play” (258) does contain a germ of truth, because proof of the expanded formulation of the foundational principle will establish it as the “first principle” of ethics. But, it is a principle that must be provided a solid logical foundation and proof, not left as an unvalidated “first choice.”

The difference between the “first principle” and subsequent action choices is that the “first principle” must be validated as a cognitive truth. Subsequent choices are validated by reference to the truth of the “first principle.” The “first task” of an ethical theory is to prove its “first principle” to be true.

Can we prove that the voluntary acceptance and use of the principle of holding one’s own life as the motive and goal of one’s action is a valid cognitive judgment that grounds normative actions? Is it logically permissible to use cognitive action of consciousness to validate a principle for guiding normative action? Not only is it logically permissible, it is logically mandatory. The act of validating means using specific actions of consciousness to demonstrate correspondence with reality. Action of consciousness is required if truth is sought. However, there is no implication here that truth “should” be sought. That would introduce ethical considerations before the foundation for ethics is proved.

### **The Key to Proof**

Since the time when Hume said it seems inconceivable that an “ought” proposition can be deduced from any set of “is” propositions, many have thought the task of proof to be impossible. They see descriptions of reality as so radically different from prescriptions for action that no logical process could take one from descriptive premises to prescriptive conclusions. They appear to overlook the fact that the results of action are descriptive facts. The characteristics and causes of action are also descriptive facts. Integration of those facts is a requirement of truth and will be essential to proof.

The key to proof is to abstract from consciousness its cognitive

and normative aspects. The processes that lead to truth are cognitive processes. The choice to use various cognitive processes, *or not*, is a normative process. One can *describe* the cognitive processes that most reliably lead to truth without passing *prescriptive* judgment on the *use* of those processes. This fact makes possible the cognitive grounding of normative judgment.

Certainly, implementation of cognitive processes requires normative commitment, but we need to prove an ethical theory that validates that commitment. The only aspect of normative action relevant to cognitive proof is incorporation of descriptions of those actions into a cognitive framework. If it can be shown that building such descriptions into a noncontradictory body of mental contents *requires* specific normative action, then a proven link from the descriptive to the prescriptive will be forged.

Once the foundational principle is proved true, we can derive actions that “should” be taken, actions that are required to implement the foundational principle. “Should” is a normative concept and has no meaning apart from a foundational principle for guiding action.

## Method of Proof

I will use a “*reductio ad absurdum*” approach to proof by examining action based on the negation of “the choice to live” principle and showing that it provides evidence of contradictory mental contents. Objectivity requires the noncontradictory integration of all relevant facts. That means awareness of one’s own volitional acts, their causes, and their consequences must be integrated. The attempt at that integration will reveal a contradiction if one chooses action based on the negation of “the choice to live” principle. Proof follows from the resolution of that contradiction.

Rasmussen violates the requirement of objectivity by assuming that which is to be proved. His statement that “an individual’s self-perfection or good—is the natural end or *telos* of human choice” (Rasmussen 2006, 313) seems to be intended as validation of the choice to live. It fails on two counts. Teleology describes goal-directed action, not value-directed action. (I will later discuss how action toward goals and action toward values differ.) Second, the statement fails because labeling an end as a “natural end” provides no guidance. Are we to assume that we “should” seek that which is a

natural end? The “natural end” of some diseases is death. Should we seek that?

Machan’s approach also lacks objectivity. His acceptance of the choice to live as a “basic conditional option” (Machan 2006, 259), with the alternative not being a “live option” (260), bypasses the requirement of objective analysis and proof.

Mack’s stress on the function of valuing is on the right track. His approach will benefit from an expanded application of objectivity to the principal concepts related to valuing.

### **The Meaning of “Value”**

To protect against equivocation, this paper will carefully use the term “value” to denote a single concept valid for all living organisms. I will adopt the terminology of “The Categories, Values, and Value Principles” (Hartford 2001) and strictly limit the concept of value to denote a beneficial condition for its own life that an organism produces through its own action.

In a human context, some authors use the term value to denote any goal sought or anything that a person chooses to value. That is more properly labeled a value principle. This paper will not use the term value to denote a value principle. Also, this 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.

Rasmussen’s emphasis on “natural ends” blurs the distinction between values and goals. When an organism seeks and achieves some end, it may be beneficial, neutral, or harmful to the organism. If those ends are considered “natural ends” and “natural ends” are the source of guidance, that precludes an analysis based on beneficial or harmful effect on life.

For all living organisms, value-directed actions are a subset of goal-directed actions. It is critical to understand this distinction. Goals and values both require an organism’s action to achieve the specified end, but referents of goal and referents of value differ along the dimension of effect on life. Along that dimension, goals include all referents, while values include only those referents where the organism’s action achieves a beneficial end for the organism (Hartford 1996).

Value-directed action, if successful, leads to beneficial results for

the organism that acts to achieve that value. For example, the results may be acquisition of food, protection from predators, or production of other conditions that benefit the organism's life. Value pursuit can lead to short-term, life-sustaining action or to longer-term, life-enhancing action. Benefit to the organism's life is the result of successful value pursuit. This concept of value agrees with Mack's view that "the function of values—or better yet the function of valuing—is the sustenance of the life of the valuing entity" (Mack 2003, 9).

Organisms can and do sometimes act for goals that do not result in achieving any value. Although seeking light may be beneficial to a moth in most circumstances, and is a built-in goal-directed behavior, the moth does not achieve any value by flying into a candle flame. A male praying mantis is in danger of being eaten by the female when it participates as part of that species' reproductive mechanism. That goal-directed action may be necessary for continuation of the species, but the result of being eaten is certainly not a benefit, and hence not a value, to that individual male praying mantis.

The fact that a human being can pursue goals that do not achieve values, i.e., that do not benefit that person's life, is well known. That such goals follow from the person's "value principles" is irrelevant to proof of an ethical system. What is at issue here is proving an ethical system that includes guidance for assessing the objective validity of a person's value principles.

### **The Meaning of "Valuing Mechanism"**

The concept of a valuing mechanism also applies to all living organisms. An organism's valuing mechanisms are its specific biological features that enable it to pursue and achieve values. Components of valuing mechanisms detect the environment, process the selected data, and initiate action that aims at value achievement. There is a myriad of valuing mechanisms that enable the wide variety of existing organisms to live. These mechanisms perform the "function of valuing" identified by Mack (2003, 10).

However, valuing mechanisms are not always successful. There may be factors that make successful valuing impossible and cause the organism to suffer or die. A valuing mechanism may become damaged and fail. Just as a broken glass pane is no longer a glass

pane, a “broken” valuing mechanism is no longer a valuing mechanism. If a biological mechanism causes action toward a goal harmful to the organism, the mechanism is not a valuing mechanism in that context.

### **Volitional Pursuit of Value**

As more complex life evolved, valuing mechanisms diversified and became more complex. Some *human* actions are not uniquely determined by detection of aspects of the environment. The factual-normative gap discussed by Mack arises because many human actions are not deterministic, but are the result of volitional mental processes.

With the evolution of a volitional mechanism to select action, the question arises: Is there some *cognitive* principle to demonstrate that a particular choice of action is valid? Is there an equivalent in the realm of action to the criterion in cognitive judgment of “correspondence to reality”?

### **Cognitive and Normative Abstractions**

To validate a normative judgment, the meaning of “correspondence to reality” needs to be clear. We must bring the correspondence theory of truth to the realm of the normative.

In dealing with the foundations of knowledge, David Kelley (1998, 17), in “Evidence and Justification,” gives “a justification of knowledge that goes all the way down, based upon a set of epistemological standards to which all knowledge is subject.” He starts “all the way down” with a person’s very first awareness and provides justification of an entire hierarchy of knowledge. Similarly, a justification of normative judgments must be traced to such foundational roots. Rand’s analysis of cognitive and normative abstractions provides an approach that makes such a justification possible.

In “The Romantic Manifesto,” Rand (1975, 18) distinguishes between cognitive abstractions and normative abstractions. Cognitive conceptual chains are the means to “acquire and retain . . . knowledge of reality.” Normative conceptual chains, “derived from and dependent on” (18) cognitive chains, are the means to apply knowledge in order to choose goals and actions. “The first deals with knowledge of the facts . . . the second, with the evaluation of these facts” (175).

The first describes what is; the second guides choice of action.

### **Factual-Normative Bridge Criterion**

Where is the bridge? What criteria connect the normative chain to its logical predecessor, the cognitive chain? How can one know that choice of action is in accord with reality?

Rand claims that the normative is “derived from and dependent on” the cognitive. If that is true, one will have normative judgments that go “all the way down,” extending Kelley’s analysis of cognitive judgments to the realm of normative judgments.

There are three aspects involved in action selection: 1) choice of a goal to pursue; 2) choice of action required; and 3) the result of choosing and implementing the action. All three aspects involve facts that are available to one’s awareness, either extrospective or introspective.

Just as a knowledge claim can be integrated into the rest of one’s knowledge, an action decision, its causes, its implementation, and its results can be integrated into one’s mental contents. Noncontradictory integration of descriptive facts related to normative judgment will strengthen Mack’s bridging of the factual-normative gap.

### **A Simple Example**

Consider a simple driving example. Imagine yourself approaching a slow moving car in the right lane, deciding to pull out to pass, and swerving into an oncoming car in the left lane. You begin getting angry and blaming the slow driver. That reaction is based on mental contents that implicitly assign responsibility to the slow driver. This contradicts your considered judgment that ensuring the passing lane was free was your own responsibility. Your mind contains two aspects that are contradictory: your considered judgment and the mental origin of your immediate reaction. Your mind is not a non-contradictory whole. Your awareness of your anger and your use of introspection provide evidence from which you can determine that, at least at a subconscious level, your mind holds two contradictory premises.

This simple example demonstrates how introspection and awareness of one’s actions can provide evidence of contradictory mental content. An integrated mind cannot exist until the conflict is

resolved. However, nothing has been said or is implied here that indicates you “should” resolve the conflict. The fact of the conflict is a cognitive truth. Only a validated ethical theory can provide reasons for concluding that the conflict “should” be resolved or “should not” be resolved.

### **Choice of Harmful Action**

Knowledge of valuing mechanisms and the study of human value achievement lead to identifying the human mind as an important human valuing mechanism. The mind has unsurpassed power to select action that results in pursuit and achievement of values, pursuit and achievement of that which benefits one’s life.

All volitional action originates from a person’s mind, conscious or subconscious. If the mind chooses volitional action that one knows (at some level, conscious or subconscious) to be harmful to one’s life, some aspect of the mind is implicitly acting on the premise that the human mind is not a valuing mechanism. The law of noncontradiction tells us that the mind cannot both be and not be a valuing mechanism at the same time and in the same context. Either the identification of the mind as a human valuing mechanism is an error or the use of the mind to select harmful action is an error.

Resolution of the contradiction requires either rejecting the mind as a human valuing mechanism or rejecting the selection of harmful action. The first choice contradicts the modern understanding of living organisms and the evolution of the human species. The second choice requires analyzing the reasons for selection of harmful action and correcting the errors that led to the action. The contradiction would not arise if one chooses action based on holding one’s own life as the motive and goal of one’s action. Choosing action harmful to one’s life is a negation of that principle and leads to the above contradiction.

The resolution of the contradiction is, *and must be*, independent of normative context. No normative principle may be applied to a proof of the foundational principle for normative judgments. Since all normative principles are “genetically dependent” on the foundational principle, to use a normative principle would commit a logical fallacy similar to the fallacy of the “stolen concept.”

This analysis provides a criterion for “correspondence to reality”

in the realm of normative action. The action, its causes, and its consequences must integrate with the rest of one's mental contents. For noncontradictory integration, volitional selection of action must be in accord with holding one's own life as the motive and goal of one's action.

### **From Acceptance to Use**

Earlier we saw that the law of noncontradiction requires coupling of acceptance and use. What does acceptance of the foundational principle imply about use of the principle?

Use, compatible with the foundational principle, requires selecting action beneficial to one's life. Therefore, one must *know* what action actually does benefit one's life. Knowing requires objectivity. The choice to use objectivity (colloquially the "choice to think") is denoted by the concept of rationality. Interestingly, from the proven "choice to live" it follows that the "choice to think" is required; on the other hand, the "choice to think" was first required in order to develop the proof or follow the proof of the "choice to live." So, which is prior?

The question "Which is prior?" exhibits the logical fallacies of missing context and unanchored concepts. In terms of the hierarchical justification of knowledge, the proven foundational principle of ethics was prior to showing that the "choice to think" is required for implementation. In terms of describing an individual's development from first awareness to full conceptual awareness, the individual's "choice to think" is prior to the ability of that individual to even understand the meaning of the "choice to live."

So, which is prior? There is no out-of-context answer to the question. Also, without firmly anchoring the "choice to live" and the "choice to think" to the facts of reality, even the meaning of the question is unclear. Connecting the "choice to live" with "acceptance and use of the principle of holding one's own life as the motive and goal of one's action" and connecting the "choice to think" with "the acceptance of objectivity as the means to knowledge" helps to anchor the phrases.

### **Resolution of the "Logical/Moral Paradox"**

Using objective analysis, we have proved the foundational "first principle" of ethics. We then showed that use of the foundational

principle implies that rationality, which is the acceptance of objectivity as the means to knowledge, is the required tool to implement the foundational principle.

Objectivity thus has two distinct roles: its descriptive role for logically proving the choice to live, and its normative role for implementation of the choice to live. Choosing life is both logically and morally valid. Therefore, it is not surprising to find commentary that treats the failure to choose life as a logical failure and other commentary that treats the failure to choose life as a moral failure.

Rasmussen, in particular, interprets Leonard Peikoff's comments on this issue as contradictory. Rasmussen (2006, 310) concludes that Peikoff on one hand "condemn[s] morally the choice not to live" and that Peikoff on the other hand asserts that "the choice to live precedes morality."

The equivocal use of "the choice to live" in the above quotations may make the accusation of contradiction appear valid. For clarity, "the choice to live" often needs to be modified by "to prove," "proof of," "to implement," or "implementation of." 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."

One should not be overly critical of those who sometimes focus on the cognitive failure to prove the choice of life and sometimes focus on the moral failure to implement the choice of life. Only a detailed analysis and a process of introspection can fully determine the relative contribution of logical errors and moral errors in any failure to choose to live.

## **Conclusion**

Mack (2006, 305) stated that it is easier "to knock down arguments rather than having to advance positive arguments." I have tried to do both. I have been critical of some of the arguments in the various papers featured in the pages of this journal and I have provided an additional argument for the validity of the Objectivist ethics.

The essence of egoism and the foundation of an objectively verifiable ethical system is the acceptance and use of the principle of holding one's own life as the motive and goal of one's action. Rand

has shown us that truth, and continued vigorous discussion in the pages of *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* will perhaps someday lead us to agree on its proof.

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