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On the Relation between Values and Virtues for Rand

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First of all, what is ethics? Ayn Rand says it is “a code of values to guide man’s choices and actions – the choices and actions that determine the purpose and the course of his life. Ethics, as a science, deals with discovering and defining such a code.”¹ In Objectivist ethics, value is not arbitrary. It is not subjective in the sense of being dependent purely on one’s desires or preferences, it is not purely conventional or customary, and it is not merely an invention to disguise power relations. The concept of value has a foundation in the nature of existence; it is grounded in metaphysical fact. Rand, like Aristotle, held that virtue is dependent upon value; therefore, it too is grounded in metaphysical fact. It is in this sense that the concepts of value and virtue are objective. And contrary to what many think, value being objective does not necessarily imply that it is agent-neutral, i.e., objectivity does not necessarily entail a deontological account of ethics like Kant’s, in which virtue is divorced from value. The agent-relativity of value will be discussed further below, as will the exact nature of how virtue is dependent upon value. Additionally, there is actually something of a controversy over the proper interpretation of Rand on the issue of how virtue relates to value. Is the relationship a *constitutive* one or merely a *causal* one? By extension, what relation does virtue have to one’s ultimate standard of value (one’s life) and to one’s highest moral purpose (one’s own happiness)? These issues will be discussed as well.

¹ Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: Signet, 1964), p. 13.

With the Objectivist understanding of the nature and function of ethics, the next crucial question, of course, is: what are values? “Value,” Rand writes, “is that which one acts to gain and/or keep.” The concept of value, Rand argues, presupposes individuals “to whom” something can be “of value” and also presupposes the question of “for what purpose.”² With an agent-neutral conception of value, something can be of value in and of itself without reference to any valuer. This is essentially what Rand called intrinsic value. Many environmentalists, for example, hold pristine nature to be of intrinsic or agent-neutral value. Some deontological theories of ethics, which may even ostensibly talk of virtue, like Kant’s, hold certain actions to be good in and of themselves, irrespective of their consequences or the goals of the actors; indeed, for Kant, an action is not even truly virtuous unless done disinterestedly, without expectation of gain. Intrinsic or agent-neutral value makes little sense, however. How can anything be of value except *to someone*? And why would or should anyone value something if it served no purpose for him? That is, if it did not benefit him or, in the case of devaluing, harm him in some way?

The question remains, however: on what basis is something a value? It cannot be simply because we choose it. If that were the case, values truly would be arbitrary. To correctly identify our values, we require a *standard* of value that is grounded in metaphysical fact.

It is only living beings capable of rational thought that require a code of ethics, for it is only such beings that are capable of choosing goals and the means to achieve them from among alternatives. Men need a guide for discovering the goals they ought to pursue and the proper means for achieving them. Like other living organisms but unlike

² Ibid., p. 16.

inanimate matter, human beings constantly face the alternative of continued life or death. Choose correctly and life continues, even flourishes; incorrectly, and the result is suffering and ultimately death. Some things are beneficial to living organisms, others are harmful. How are human beings, who are not born with strong innate instincts, to discover and judge which is which? Rand argues that the proper standard is an organism's life as the kind of being it is. Thus, the standard of value for man is "man's survival *qua* man," i.e., as a rational being. "[T]hat which is proper to the life of a rational being is the good; that which negates, opposes or destroys it is the evil."³ Rand further distinguishes the contextual difference between life as a standard and as a goal: as a standard, man's life (that's man as a natural kind) is an abstract principle by which we each gauge what is good or bad for us, while a particular man's *own* life is his goal or purpose.

The virtues are the actions "by which one gains and keeps" the values he seeks.⁴ Thus are the virtues dependent upon our values. Rand adds further specificity to life as a standard and a goal by identifying three cardinal values that are both "the means to and the realizations of" it: "Reason, Purpose, Self-Esteem, with their three corresponding virtues: Rationality, Productiveness, Pride."⁵ Rand argues that productive work is the central propose of a rational man's life. It is both made possible and necessitated by man's faculty of reason. Life is conditional and values to not come automatically. One must produce values in order to maintain and further one's life, and to do that well one must make rational use of one's mind. While the virtue of productiveness is not limited to the economic realm narrowly defined, as values are not, productive *work* is a central part

³ Ibid., p. 25.

⁴ Ibid., p. 27.

⁵ Ibid.

of it. It provides one not only with the ‘material’ values needed to survive and flourish but also a core personal identity with which to integrate and determine the hierarchy of all one’s other values. Knowing that we are efficacious and worthy of life results in necessary self-esteem. And the virtue of pride is a commitment to moral perfection, to earning that self-esteem, to avoiding vice and correcting one’s flaws and moral errors.

Rationality is man’s basic virtue, for it makes the others possible and is presupposed by them. It “means the recognition and acceptance of reason as one’s only source of knowledge, one’s only judge of values and one’s only guide to action.”⁶ In productive work it “means the consciously chosen pursuit of a productive career, in any line of rational endeavor, great or modest, on any level of ability.”⁷ We have already seen how rationality is a part of the virtue of pride. There are also four other cardinal virtues identified by Rand. A commitment to rationality means:

...one’s acceptance of the responsibility of forming one’s own judgments and of living by the work of one’s own mind (which is the virtue of Independence). It means that one must never sacrifice one’s convictions to the opinions or wishes of others (...Integrity) – that one must never attempt to fake reality in any manner (...Honesty) – that one must never seek or grant the unearned and undeserved, neither in matter nor in spirit (...Justice).⁸

Objectivists David Kelley and William Thomas add an eighth cardinal virtue, which they see as being consistent with and implied by Rand’s philosophy: benevolence, which subsumes four minor virtues: sensitivity, tolerance, civility, and generosity.⁹

For the student of Aristotle, however, questions arise. Is virtue merely an action that gains and keeps a value? Or is virtue, as per Aristotle, a character trait, i.e., a stable

⁶ Ibid., p. 28.

⁷ Ibid., p. 29.

⁸ Ibid., p. 28

⁹ See *The Logical Structure of Objectivism*, Ch. 6, unpublished manuscript; <<http://www.objectivistcenter.com>>.

disposition to act in the right manner for the right goal?¹⁰ For Rand they are clearly long-standing and deeply held commitments, not merely isolated actions. A related question is whether the virtues are themselves values for Rand. Are they merely *causally* related to values and one's ultimate value and goal, one's life? Put another way: are the virtues *constitutive* of a life proper to man or *mere* means to it?¹¹ On one interpretation, the virtues are only of value insofar as they result in gaining and keeping the thing or things that are valuable in their own right. Here virtue is only of *instrumental* value. On the other interpretation, there is some inherent value¹² in the virtues themselves *in addition to* the instrumental value they derive from the value of the ends we achieve by them. Here we choose virtue partly for itself and would do so even if no further advantage would accrue from it, but we also choose it partly for the sake of its product.¹³

Another way of putting the issue is the way Douglas Rasmussen and Douglas Den Uyl put it. They distinguish between conceiving of man's ultimate end as a dominant one or an inclusive one. For them, and for Aristotle, a life proper to man, while being the ultimate standard and goal of man's actions, "is not the only activity of inherent worth. It is not a 'dominant' end that reduces the value of everything else to that of a mere means to it. Neither is it monistic and simple. Rather, it is 'the *most* final end and is never sought for the sake of anything else, because it includes all final ends'."¹⁴ The various values and virtues "are valuable not as mere means to human flourishing but as expressions of it, and

¹⁰ Thus, Aristotle distinguishes between virtue and virtuous actions.

¹¹ In making this important distinction I am of course not claiming that constitutive means are not causal; rather I am just pointing out that they are not *merely* causal (as in an externally related cause).

¹² Normally I would use 'intrinsic' here, meant not in the sense in which Rand used the term in distinguishing between objective, intrinsic and subjective value, but rather in the more conventional sense of 'in the thing itself' or "as an end in itself"; that is, virtue is valuable to us on its own merits and not just through the ends we achieve by it.

¹³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b ff.

¹⁴ Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl, *Norms of Liberty: A Perfectionist Basis for Non-Perfectionist Politics* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), p. 129.

thus as partial realizations of it as well. As such, these goods [values] and virtues are final ends and valuable in their own right.”¹⁵

To raise these questions regarding causal versus constitutive means, instrumental versus inherent value, dominant versus inclusive end, is to dance around that familiar controversy of Objectivist ethics: viz., is the standard of value and ultimate goal of man identified by Rand a survivalist standard/goal or a flourishing standard/goal? It is necessary to answer this more fundamental question in order to understand fully the relation between values and virtues. If the standard and goal is one of mere survival, then this seems too thin a conception to support anything more than a view of virtue as merely a causal means to survival and thus of only instrumental value to that dominant end. Mere survival as the standard and goal also makes it difficult, if not impossible, to justify, for example, Galt’s willingness to die rather than see Dagny tortured in *Atlas Shrugged*. On the other hand, if the standard and goal is one of flourishing and if flourishing is an inclusive end, then the virtues can themselves be inherently valuable and would therefore be a constitutive part of a life proper to man.

Which is the proper interpretation of Rand’s account of values, including one’s standard of value and ultimate goal, and of the virtues? I tend to agree with Roderick Long¹⁶ that there are some inconsistencies and ambiguities in the way Rand presents her theory of ethics – over time, between her fiction and non-fiction works, and within her non-fiction works. Unlike Long, however, I think that on balance the evidence weighs in on the side of the flourishing interpretation. The meaning of any given passage should be interpreted in light of the full context of Rand’s work, not analyzed in isolation. To begin

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 130. Note that ‘inherent/intrinsic value’ and ‘final ends’ as used above are agent-relative.

¹⁶ Roderick T. Long, *Reason and Value: Aristotle versus Rand* (Poughkeepsie, NY: The Objectivist Center, 2000).

with, if mere survival were the standard there would be no need for Rand to add ‘qua man’ at the end of ‘man’s survival *qua* man’. Adding ‘qua man’ imbues the phrase ‘man’s survival’ with the meaning of ‘survival as a rational being, not as any other animal or living organism’.¹⁷ Moreover, she argues that the three cardinal values are both “the means to *and the realizations of* one’s ultimate value, one’s own life.”¹⁸ Then, on the same page, she argues that the *result* of productive work, the central purpose of a rational man’s life, is pride.¹⁹ Unless Rand was simply careless, I think it is telling that she used the name of a cardinal virtue here rather than the cardinal value to which it corresponds, self-esteem. It suggests that she made a conceptual distinction but not a radical separation between the values and the virtues; and, furthermore, it suggests that the virtues themselves are also realizations of, and not merely means to, one’s own life. It is in Rand’s fiction especially that one can see that she conceived of the life proper to man as one of flourishing in the Aristotelian sense. The protagonists experience joy and value not merely in surviving or in the products of their efforts but in the very acts of creating, of producing, of listening to Halley’s performances, of spending time in the company of others like themselves, and seeing their highest values mirrored in the persons of other human beings. They are even willing to risk, and even give up, their lives for their highest values. All of the above and more I take as evidence that Rand’s ‘man’s survival *qua* man’ is an inclusive flourishing standard.

¹⁷ See Rand (1964), p. 26.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 27. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ Ibid.