

Is Benevolent Egoism Coherent?

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What was Ayn Rand's "new concept of egoism"?¹ Rand lamented that the word "selfishness" conjures up in the popular mind the image of someone who cares about no one and who violates others' rights indiscriminately in the pursuit of his own whims (Rand 1964, vii). Her new conception of egoism was to be that of a both *rational* and *benevolent* (but selfish) way of life. The idea of combining rationality with egoism is understandable to most, but, to many, the idea of combining *benevolence* with *selfishness* seems paradoxical. It is this apparent paradox that I want to examine.

Central to Rand's ideal of benevolent egoism are the following two principles:

P1: I should never sacrifice myself for the benefit of others.

P2: I should never sacrifice others for the benefit of myself.²

(Rand 1964, 27)

While these principles are logically consistent with each other, there is a deep tension between them in the context of the Objectivist ethics. The tension consists in the fact that Rand gives arguments in support of P1 and P2 that contradict each other, that depend on contradictory assumptions, and/or that are extremely implausible empirically. The result is that while the conjunction of P1 and P2 is logically coherent, Rand's defense of it is not. I will explain these problems below, followed by a proposal for how one might try to resolve the tension.

The Principle of Ethical Egoism

P1 is an application of the more fundamental principle of "ethical egoism" apparently endorsed by Rand. Ethical egoism is usually defined, roughly, as the doctrine that each person should always do whatever best promotes his own interests (Peikoff 1991, 230; Rachels 1986, 66). However, ethical egoism is not merely a description of *what* one should do. Rather, it is concerned with *why* one should act; it is a theory about the sorts of reasons one can have for acting in a particular way (Hunt 1999, 74).

To make this point clear, suppose you met a theist who believed that the ultimate purpose of life was to glorify and serve God, and not to serve oneself. Suppose, however, that this theist also believed that, if one acted rightly by obeying God's commands, God would ultimately reward one for it, so that it would turn out to have been in one's own interests to serve God. Nevertheless, the theist insists, what makes an action right is the fact that it serves God, not the fact that you will be rewarded for it. So although your acts, say, of worshiping on Sundays, would *both* serve God *and* serve your own interests, you should perform them *because* of the former and not because of the latter.

The point of this example: the theist in question is not an ethical egoist. Why not? Because, even though he believes you should do the things that will serve your own interests, he does not believe that you should do them *for that reason*; he thinks the reason you should do them is something else.

Thus, if we want to capture the essence of ethical egoism, we must state what the egoist considers to be a good reason for acting. Namely, the egoist thinks:

EE: The only good reason I can ever have for doing (or not doing) anything is that it would serve (or interfere with) my own interests.³

P1 is an application of EE: by definition, sacrificing myself for the benefit of others would not serve my own interests,⁴ while refraining

from doing so would. Therefore, according to EE, I have good reason not to sacrifice myself for the benefit of others, and no reason to sacrifice myself. I should not do what I have no reason to do and good reason not to do; ergo, I should not sacrifice myself for the benefit of others. P1 is, then, an implication of EE, and it is reasonable to assume that Rand conceived EE as the reason why P1 is true—although we will have occasion to scrutinize this assumption further below.

Moore's Objection to Ethical Egoism

Before going on to examine the arguments in support of P2, it will be useful to have first considered an objection to ethical egoism that G. E. Moore brought forward around the start of the last century. Moore identified the following as the fundamental contradiction of egoism: The egoist says that each person ought rationally to hold, "My own happiness is the sole good." "What egoism holds, therefore, is that *each* man's happiness is the sole good—that a number of different things are *each* of them the only good thing there is—an absolute contradiction!" (Moore 1960, §59). Moore seems to have been relying on the premise that, if you say that a person should pursue *x* exclusively, you are thereby committed to saying that *x* is the sole good. Thus, if I say that I should pursue my own happiness exclusively, I am committed to saying that my own happiness is the sole good; if someone else's happiness were also good, then that would be a reason for me to pursue it. But at the same time, the egoist thinks that *you* should pursue *your* own happiness exclusively, which implies that *your* happiness is the sole good. Two distinct things can't both be the sole good, so egoism cannot be true.

We can phrase the conflict another way, in terms of the idea that individuals are *ends in themselves*. Let *A* be an egoist, and let *B* be the egoist's next-door neighbor. *A* regards his own life as an end in itself, and he says *B* ought to regard *B*'s life as an end in itself. But, insofar as *A* is concerned only for furthering his own life, *A* cannot, himself, treat *B*'s life as an end in itself. *A*'s sole value is *A*'s life; therefore, *A* can value *B*'s life, if at all, only as a *means* (i.e., if *B*'s life

further *A*'s). Similarly, when *A* recommends to *B* that *B* should be an egoist, he is recommending that *B* should regard *A* as being only valuable as a means. This necessarily follows from the supposition that *B* should regard *B*'s life as the sole end in itself. *A* therefore seems to be caught in a contradiction: *A* holds that *A*'s own life is an end in itself, but at the same time *A* thinks that no one else ought to recognize *A*'s life as being an end in itself.

In a parallel contradiction, *A* holds that other people are valuable only as means, but he holds that other people are correct in regarding themselves as valuable *not* merely as means but as ends in themselves. In other words: Each individual is correct in a belief that directly contradicts what every other individual *correctly* believes. *A* is correct to believe *P*, but *B* is correct to believe not-*P*.

Notice that here, the Objectivist doctrine that rational people's interests never conflict, even if true, would provide no help. That the life of my next door neighbor should be an end in itself and that also, it should be valuable only as a means to further my own happiness, is a contradiction, regardless of how well my and my neighbor's happiness may harmonize.

The likely Objectivist response would be that Moore is here relying on an absolutist conception of value, whereas Objectivism recognizes only relative value (Smith 2000, 97–99)—that is, Moore is assuming that it makes sense to call something good simply, without any further qualification; whereas, according to Objectivism, things can only be good *for*, or *relative to*, specific individuals. In fact, Moore (1960, 99) made this assumption explicit:

[W]hen I talk of a thing as 'my own good' all that I can mean is that something which will be exclusively mine, as my own pleasure is mine . . . is also *good absolutely*; or rather that my possession of it is *good absolutely*. The *good* of it can in no possible sense be 'private' or belong to me; any more than a thing can *exist* privately or *for* one person only.

But just as Moore emphatically asserted that value was absolute, Rand emphatically asserted that it was relative.⁵ If there is only agent-

relative value, then the egoist can respond to Moore's argument as follows: "Your argument involves an equivocation. You attribute to me the view that my happiness is the sole good and my neighbor's happiness is the sole good. This is a contradiction if there is only a single sense of 'good' involved here, which would be what you call 'absolute good.' But I maintain that in fact there are two sorts of 'good' involved: good relative to me, and good relative to my neighbor. My own happiness is the sole good-for-me, and my neighbor's happiness is the sole good-for-him. This is no contradiction, since the predicate 'good-for-me' is not the same as the predicate 'good-for-my-neighbor.'" Unfortunately, neither Rand nor Moore produced detailed arguments for their own conception of value, so we seem to be at an impasse. We will return to this issue below.

Arguments for P2

P2 cannot be derived from EE in the same way as P1 was. That is, one cannot argue: "By definition, sacrificing others for the benefit of myself would not serve my own interests," for the opposite seems to be the case. By definition, sacrificing others for the benefit of myself *would* serve my interests. EE seems to imply, off hand, the contrary of P2, namely that I should sacrifice others for the benefit of myself whenever possible, for I would have a reason to do so (it would serve my interests) and no reason not to.

So some further argument for P2 is required. I consider four possible arguments.

(1) Rand claims that sacrificing others would not in fact best serve my interests: "The Objectivist ethics holds that *human* good does not require human sacrifices and *cannot be achieved by the sacrifice of anyone to anyone*. It holds that the *rational* interests of men do not clash" (Rand 1964, 31; second emphasis added). So the argument is that I should never sacrifice others for my own benefit, because I will never be successful in doing so; any attempt to do so will always backfire on me in some way.

It is important to realize that Rand is making a strong universal

generalization. It is not just that, for the most part, sacrificing others or violating their rights won't help you; she is claiming (see above) that sacrificing others *cannot* benefit you. She makes equally absolute statements about rights: "Since Man has inalienable individual rights, this means that the same rights are held, individually, by every man, by *all men, at all times*" ("Textbook of Americanism," cited in Rand 1988, 215). And: "*Inalienable* means that which we may not take away, suspend, infringe, restrict or violate—not ever, not at any time, not for any purpose whatsoever" (211). The preceding remarks indicate that Rand held the principle of individual rights (which, for her, amounts to the principle that no person may initiate the use or threat of physical force against another⁶) as an absolute one: that is, as a moral principle admitting of no exceptions. Given this, it is reasonable to assume that Rand would have regarded P2 as equally absolute; indeed, P2 seems to be a logical implication of the principle of individual rights, insofar as 'sacrificing' another person seems to entail violating his rights in some way.

In order for this first argument on behalf of P2 to succeed, Rand would have to be able to argue that there are no circumstances whatsoever under which any person can profit from sacrificing others or violating their rights. Now, there are two problems here. The first problem is that Rand lacks adequate evidence for this very strong claim. Referring to people who make a living by preying on others, she writes:

Such looters may achieve their goals for the range of a moment, at the price of destruction: the destruction of their victims and their own. As evidence, I offer you any criminal or any dictatorship. (Rand 1964, 24)

Unfortunately, Rand gives no further elaboration on the last sentence. But the argument seems to be this: (1) Every criminal and every dictatorship has destroyed him/itself. (2) We can generalize from this to the conclusion that every violation of rights will run contrary to the violator's interests. (3) Therefore, no one should violate rights. This reasoning would be in accordance with the general framework of

ethical egoism, thus resolving the tension between EE and P2. But in order to establish (1), Rand would have to give some further elaboration beyond the assertions above. An extensive, empirical study of a wide range of dictatorships and criminals, from various time periods and various places around the world, would be necessary in order to rationally conclude that none of them have ever profited. Obviously, the evidence Rand offers us is inadequate. Furthermore, even if (1) were established, it is far from clear that we can reasonably generalize from that to a conclusion about every possible rights violation. (I will consider another class of rights violations presently, to which Rand's generalization does not seem to apply.)

Now, the second major problem, apart from having no real evidence in its support, is that Rand's claim that sacrificing others, or violating others' rights, would always harm the agent's own interests, is extremely implausible empirically. Consider only one instance: We know that, according to Rand's conception of rights, the activities of the federal government of the United States involve widespread, serious rights-violations, which have been ongoing for several decades at the least and show no signs of letting up. The individuals involved in carrying out those rights-violations have been what Rand would call "looters." Yet they have not been destroyed, and their victims (the taxpayers) have not been destroyed either.⁷ Where Rand may have gone wrong is in considering only two extremes: that of completely respecting others' rights, and so stealing nothing, and that of stealing so much that the economic system collapses. The 'prudent predators' of today's welfare state implement an intermediate strategy designed to net themselves the greatest amount (or at least a large amount) of unearned wealth.⁸ Nor, incidentally, do these looters appear to experience a guilty conscience; all outward signs point to their being well-satisfied with their own activities. Perhaps Rand would predict that the looters *will* be destroyed at some future date, that the welfare state will collapse, and so on. Perhaps that is true, though by no means has any such conclusion been established; it remains speculation. But even if the welfare state should collapse at some future date, it would not have done so before many of those who helped build it had lived out their days peacefully. I know of no

evidence, in general, that left-wing politicians tend to have lower life expectancies or less happiness than other, non-looting individuals. It therefore seems that the first argument has failed to resolve the tension between ethical egoism and P2, leaving us with no reason why an ethical egoist would not sacrifice others.

(2) We turn to Rand's second argument in defense of P2:

The basic *social* principle of the Objectivist ethics is that just as life is an end in itself, so every living human being is an end in himself, not the means to the ends or the welfare of others—and, therefore, that man must live for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself. (27)

In this brief passage, both P1 and P2 are putatively supported by a single premise: every person is an end in himself.

When one says that something is "an end-in-itself," one means that the thing is *good*, or *valuable*, in a certain way: namely, it is good for its own sake, as opposed to being good only for the sake of something else obtainable by means of it. Recalling our earlier discussion of Moore's objection to egoism, this prompts us to ask: good *absolutely*, or good *relative* to some individual? Let us take each case separately.

First, suppose that Rand was using an absolute conception of goodness in this passage. In that case, by "every living human being is an end in himself," Rand meant that every person is an end in himself *absolutely*. This premise would support P2 to some extent, since in this case every person would have a reason to regard each individual as an end in himself, and since treating every individual as an end in himself would seem to entail never sacrificing anyone.⁹ Unfortunately, however, this use of an absolute conception of value would open Rand up to Moore's objection considered above: if she accepts the concept of an absolute end in itself, then Rand has no defense against the charge that egoism is self-contradictory.

Suppose, then, that Rand was using an agent-relative conception of goodness. In this case, by "every living human being is an end in

himself," Rand meant that every person is an end in himself *relative only to himself*. So *for me*, my life is the only end in itself, whereas *for you*, your life is the only end in itself. This is at least formally consistent so far. But now what about the rest of the sentence: "not the means to the ends or the welfare of others." Well, of course, *for me*, my life is an end in itself. But for *other* people, it is not; we just established that. So why wouldn't my life be *for them* just a means to their own ends? Why wouldn't my life *from my neighbor's point of view* be good only as a means to promoting my neighbor's life?¹⁰

Similarly, what are we to make of the remark, "man must live for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself"? Clearly, given that my life is, for me, the only end in itself, I would be irrational to sacrifice it for the sake of others. But why would I not be rational to sacrifice others to myself? True, their lives are ends in themselves *for them*, but why should I care about that? Once we introduce agent-relativity of value, the value of my neighbors' lives (to them) becomes irrelevant to my own practical deliberation; it provides no reason for *me* to act. Rand's implicit assertion that it *follows* ("... therefore ...") from the statement that another person's life is an end in itself, that I should not sacrifice another person's life, clearly depends on the absolutist conception of value, for only such absolute value would provide a universal reason to act (i.e., a reason that all agents have); agent-relative value would only provide a reason for that individual to act. If my neighbor's life is non-instrumentally good-for-him, nothing follows about its being good-for-me, given that "good-for-him" and "good-for-me" are two different predicates. And so nothing follows about its being bad-for-me to sacrifice my neighbor's life.

Thus, Rand is caught in a dilemma: if she adopts an absolute conception of value, then she cannot maintain the general principle of ethical egoism, because the value of others' lives and happiness will in this case become a reason for me *to act on their behalf*; but if she hews to the agent-relative conception of value in order to avoid this result, then she cannot consistently appeal to the value of others' lives and happiness as a reason for me *not to harm them*. Rand's ostensible reason for rejecting positive obligations towards others is incompati-

ble with her reason for accepting negative obligations towards others.

(3) A third thing that Rand says relevant to P2 is that rights are necessary for one's survival; one cannot survive unless one is free to act on one's own judgment (Rand 1988, 213–14; 1964, 93–94).

This explains why an ethical egoist would defend his own rights. It does not explain why he would respect the rights of others. The rights of others may be necessary to *their* survival, but how does that show that *I* have any obligation to respect those rights?¹¹ Conspicuously absent from Rand's discussions (1988, 212–17) of what rights one has and of the importance of rights is any appeal to EE. She says people have rights because they must be free to act on their own judgment if they are to live; she does not say that people have rights because I must let them act on their own judgment if *I* am to live. The sort of reason that she gives for individuals' having rights, then, is not the reason that, according to EE, is the only good one I could possibly have for acting or not acting. Instead, she appears to be relying on the above-discussed idea that each individual life is an end in itself (absolutely); when this is combined with the premise that people's rights must be respected in order for them to live, one can infer (at least *prima facie*) that I should respect the rights of every individual.¹² But we have already seen the pitfalls involved, for Rand, in appealing to the intrinsic value of every individual life.

Perhaps Rand would argue along the following lines: as an egoist, I have a motive for trying to protect my own rights. But then, in order to be consistent, I will have to admit that other people must also have the same rights. Thus: "The only 'obligation' involved in individual rights is an obligation imposed . . . by the nature of reality . . . : *consistency*, which, in this case, means the obligation to respect the rights of others, if one wishes one's own rights to be recognized and protected" (Rand 1966, 227). Such an argument would be valid, however, only on an absolute conception of value. Rand tries to derive the existence of rights from the value of life. If the value of life is relative to an individual (i.e., each individual's life is valuable only for that individual, and not absolutely), then it stands to reason that rights would be agent-relative as well, so that they would provide reasons for action only to the individual whose life was promoted by

the recognition of the particular right in question (i.e., each individual would have reason only to recognize his own rights). If that consequent seems absurd, it can only be because the notion of deriving rights from agent-relative value is absurd.

In other words, why might not an egoist consistently say: "For me, my life is the only thing that matters. My rights are necessary for my life. Therefore, for me, the protection of my rights is imperative, and therefore I have good reason to try to stop anyone else from violating them. I recognize that the protection of other people's rights is imperative *for them*, and so *they* have reasons for wanting their rights protected. But that gives *me* no reason for wanting *their* rights protected, and accordingly gives me no reason not to violate their rights." This speech makes perfect sense *if* the egoist's defense against Moore above made sense, i.e., if it makes sense for the egoist to reject the value of others' lives as a reason for him to act on their behalf, on the grounds that that value is only relative to them. Thus, it seems that this argument, too, fails to explain why an egoist should not sacrifice others.

(4) Perhaps the problem can be solved by taking a more expansive conception of one's "interests." Clearly, when the interests under consideration are limited to life expectancy and material well-being, the claim that one's interests can never be promoted by the sacrifice of others is unfounded. But Rand proposes a presumably broader standard of value, which she describes as "that which is required for man's survival *qua man*" (1964, 23). Given Rand's generally individualistic tendencies, this must be taken to mean that the standard of value for an individual—which we are here assuming means the same as "the standard of what serves that individual's interests"—would be what is required for *that individual's* survival *qua man*.¹³

Now, before we can say anything about whether one's interests in this sense would or would not be promoted by the sacrifice of others (or by anything else, for that matter), we need to know what "man's life *qua man*" means. This is not immediately obvious, as the phrase seems to be a technical term unique to Rand. Where she introduces the concept, two succinct remarks appear that may be

intended as defining it:

The standard of value of the Objectivist ethics . . . is . . . that which is required for man's survival *qua* man. Since reason is man's basic means of survival, that which is proper to the life of a rational being is the good. (23)

and:

It does not mean a *momentary* or a merely *physical* survival . . . "Man's survival *qua* man" means the terms, methods, conditions and goals required for the survival of a rational being through the whole of his lifespan—in all those aspects that are open to his choice. (24)

Begin with the first remark. Suppose we view an individual's interests as what is "proper to the life of a rational being." There are at least two ways of taking this expression. First, "proper" may be read as "morally proper." But in this case, the standard would provide no basis for objecting to sacrificing others, nor, in fact, would it provide any genuine standard of value at all. For the putative standard would amount to this: the good (for us) is that which is morally correct (for a rational being). This is no doubt true, but it does not tell us what is morally correct. More to our present purposes, it could not be used as a basis for arguing that sacrificing others does not serve one's interests. To use it that way, one would have to argue that sacrificing others does not serve one's interests because it is not morally proper—but according to ethical egoism, in order to determine what is morally proper, one must first determine what serves one's interests. So the argument would be circular.

The second interpretation is that "proper to" means something along the lines of "consistent with" or "part of," so that the standard in question holds that what is in one's interests is just what is consistent with rationality. This interpretation of the standard raises a similar problem. Ethical egoism holds that the only reason one can have for doing anything is that it would serve one's own interests.

Therefore, if ethical egoism is true, then in order to determine what is or is not rational to do, one must first determine what is or is not in one's interests. One cannot, then, simultaneously use claims about what is rational to determine what is in one's interests, for to do so would involve circular reasoning.

Now turn to Rand's second remark above. Two contrasts are suggested: one is between momentary and long-term survival, which is further brought out by the mention of "the whole of his lifespan." The other is the contrast between a "merely physical" survival and some other sort of survival, presumably psychological.

The concern for long-term rather than merely short-term survival is taken care of by talking in terms of overall life-expectancy. As there is no evidence that all classes of individuals who violate rights—for example, liberal politicians—have a lower overall life expectancy than otherwise similar individuals who do not violate rights, this contrast is not relevant for our concerns.

What of the concept of "psychological survival"? Individuals who violate the rights of others do not in general appear to have any special difficulties with *literal* psychological survival—they do not, for example, typically fall unconscious or have their bodies taken over by other minds. Perhaps, therefore, we should instead rely on the notion of psychological *health*. Are there any arguments to show that sacrificing others always harms one's own psychological health, and does so severely enough to outweigh any material or other benefits? I consider three possible arguments to this effect: first, that it harms one's psychological health because it contributes to one's irrationality, which is always psychologically unhealthy; second, that it does so because it makes one unhappy; third, that it does so because it gives one feelings of guilt or low self-esteem.

The first argument can be dispensed with quickly, as it would depend upon the fallacy of circular reasoning discussed above: if ethical egoism is true, then in order to determine what it is rational to do, we must first determine what it is in our interests to do. If it is in my interests to sacrifice others, then it would be rational for me to do so; therefore, doing so would presumably contribute to my *rationality*, and not to my irrationality.

The second argument fares no better, for there is no reason to believe that rights-violators are generally less happy than non-rights-violators. Common sense observations do not suggest this—for example, if asked, many of the government officials engaged in rights-violations will probably say that they feel fine. Nor does Rand's theory of the emotions support this. For on Rand's theory, "happiness is that state of consciousness which proceeds from the achievement of one's values" (28). Thus, politicians who succeed in promoting what Rand would call sacrificial morality should feel happy, since they would thereby be achieving their values. It is true that Rand also argues (28–29) that one can only be happy if one pursues *rational* values. But this idea cannot be parlayed into an argument that the person who sacrifices others won't experience "true happiness" (even when he achieves what he values), unless it can first be shown independently that such sacrificing is not rational—and we have already seen the pitfalls for the appeal to rationality in this context.

Third, many (though not, I think, Rand) would argue that one should not sacrifice others or violate their alleged rights, because doing so will give one a guilty conscience and/or lower one's self-esteem. If true, this might provide an overriding reason for not sacrificing others.¹⁴ But there is no reason why this should be true, given an Objectivist conception of the emotions. For on the Objectivist theory, emotions are the result of the subject's value judgments (27–28). Thus, an individual who sacrifices others should experience guilt as a result only if he believes that it is morally wrong to sacrifice others. But why would he believe that? Perhaps if he has been taken in by conventional morality, then he would have that belief. But if he is an ethical egoist, and he believes that sacrificing others serves his own interests, then he would believe that sacrificing others is morally right. Therefore, he would feel something more like pride than guilt when he sacrificed others. We have so far seen no reason why the ethical egoist should not believe that sacrificing others is in his interests. Again, the potential for a circular argument looms: if we begin by assuming that it is not in one's own interests to sacrifice others, then we can conclude that an ethical egoist (if he

understands this fact) would feel guilt if he sacrificed others. One could then argue that the guilt would make it *even more* against his interests to sacrifice others. But this whole argument would depend upon the question-begging assumption at the start.

I will consider a final argument, due to Lester Hunt, designed to show that the good of others might literally be part of my own good and not merely a *means* to promoting my good (1999, 81–82). He suggests that this might hold particularly for my friends because "events in my friend's life can also be . . . events in my life," so that "although my friend's body does not overlap my body, his life does overlap my life," and therefore, "good things in my friend's life will be goods in my life as well" (91). The logic seems to be something like the following:

1. A is a good event in my friend's life
2. A is also an event in my life
3. Therefore, A is a good event in my life

where A is some particular event occurring in the putative overlap between our two lives. The possibility of the above derivation would show that A 's being good for my friend (a good event in his life) makes it good for me (a good event in my life), when our lives overlap.

This argument has three problems. The first is that it is invalid unless an absolute conception of "good" is used. On an agent-relative conception, there are two different predicates that may be involved in the argument, "good_{my friend}" and "good_{me}." Unless the same predicate is used in (1) and (3), the argument will be an equivocation. Thus, if (1) states that A is a good_{my friend} event in my friend's life, (3) can only conclude that A is a good_{my friend} event in my life (more colloquially: it is an event in my life that benefits my friend), not a good_{me} event in my life. And thus, it will not be shown that the event is "good for me."

Second, in order to argue that some event that was part of my life was also literally a part of someone else's life, Hunt must take a very expansive conception of what constitutes a person's life. He gives

“the dinner we shared the other day” as a possible example of an event belonging both to my life and to my friend’s. He indicates that the entire process, including the movements of *both* of our bodies, and possibly the thoughts in *both* of our minds that went along with those movements—not just the movements and thoughts carried out by me—constitute part of my life. Note that it won’t do for Hunt to say merely that some of that process was part of my life and some was part of my friend’s, since that won’t establish a literal overlap between our lives. Hunt’s view must be that, for example, *your* picking up the fork and putting some of that dinner into your mouth was itself part of *my* life. It is doubtful whether Rand would have accepted such a broad (dare I say collectivist?) notion of an individual’s life.

Third and most importantly, the issue we have been raising for ethical egoism is not limited to the treatment of one’s friends, for it is not only my friends whose rights I have an obligation to respect, according to P2. It is unclear how an argument like Hunt’s could be extended to cover the ethical status of non-friends. He mentions this problem in a footnote:

To avoid wildly counter-intuitive results, it seems that the nonconsequentialist egoist would need to show how the good of strangers, and not just the good of my friends, can to some degree be included in my own good as a part. The solution I have in mind would be based on the notion that strangers I do not know about pose no ethical problems, but once I become aware of them, to some extent my consciousness of their weal or woe adds to mine. (91 n. 23)

It is dubious that my mere awareness of others makes it the case that their good is included in mine to any significant degree. But assume that this were correct. Why would one think that this would lead to extensive, absolute, *negative* obligations towards strangers, but little or no *positive* obligations towards them? To illustrate the issue, consider two cases.

Case A: Suppose I have an opportunity to gain \$10,000 by killing a stranger. Assume that this person has not initiated force against anyone, and that I will not suffer reprisals for my action. Should I do it? According to P2, the answer is “no.”

Case B: Suppose I have the opportunity to save a stranger’s life at a cost to me of \$10,000. Assume that this person has not initiated force against anyone, and that I will not suffer reprisals for my inaction if I don’t save him. Should I do it? The Objectivist answer appears to be “no” (see Rand 1964, 46–49). (If this isn’t clear, just increase the dollar amount.)

In one respect, cases A and B are analogous: in both cases, one chooses between \$10,000 and the life of another person. The moral difference is made by the fact that in case A, choosing the money means taking a positive action harming the other person, whereas in case B, choosing the money means merely failing to take an action of helping the other person. It is owing to this that the Objectivist will give what superficially seem opposite answers in the two cases, to place the value of the stranger’s life above the value of the money in case A, but to place the value of the money above that of the stranger’s life in case B.

But Hunt’s argument provides no explanation of this, nor does any other readily apparent egoist argument. If Hunt’s argument succeeds, it shows merely that a stranger’s life is of some value to me. Is it of more value to me than \$10,000, or less?¹⁵ If it is of more value, then in case B I should give \$10,000 to save the stranger’s life. If it is of less value, then in case A I should kill the stranger to get \$10,000. (If it is of equal value, then in either case I may flip a coin to decide what to do.) What we don’t get, from the mere idea that others’ lives are of some value to me, is a moral distinction between harming others and refraining from assisting them, or (in other words) between *acts* and *omissions*. Note that I am not denying that there is a moral difference between acts and omissions. What I am claiming is that neither Hunt’s argument nor the principle of ethical egoism in general can account for the (moral significance of the

distinction.

Thus, even when we expand the notion of "self-interest" in any of the ways suggested—to include rationality, long-term interests, psychological health, and even to some degree the welfare of others—we find no basis for defending both P1 and P2 on the Objectivist understanding of them, according to which they introduce absolute negative rights but no positive rights. Is there perhaps some other aspect of self-interest, as yet unconsidered, that might ground such a defense? Perhaps—I have not considered every possible conception of what self-interest might involve, and some are simply too vague ("flourishing") to clearly determine what is in one's interests according to them. Nor have I produced a comprehensive account of my own of the content of one's interests; I do not have such an account to give. But the burden of proof would be on the proponent of EE to articulate such a theory, if necessary to defending P2, and so far this has not been accomplished. We have seen one serious obstacle that any such theory would have to negotiate: while it would have to show that the lives of others have sufficient value to me, when I am considering whether to harm them, to justify an absolute prohibition on harming them, it must at the same time *not* imply that the lives of others have sufficient value to me, when I am considering whether to help them, to justify a positive obligation to render assistance when there are significant costs to me.

Having now rejected all four proposed defenses for P2, we seem to be left with an unresolvable tension, not to say conflict, between EE—putatively the fundamental moral principle of Objectivism—and P2, the fundamental normative, social principle of Objectivism. I conclude with a perhaps surprising interpretive proposal that may at last resolve this tension.

Was Rand an Egoist?

Most students of Rand, whether followers or critics, will immediately answer "of course." But before accepting the conventional wisdom on this point, I ask the reader to carefully look through Rand's remarks about rights, selfishness, and related topics, for an

explicit statement of ethical egoism. I predict that you will not find one. Ethical egoism, again, asserts:

EE: The only reason I can ever have for doing anything is that it would serve my own interests.

The most obvious textual evidence that Rand was an ethical egoist is that she used the word "egoism" to describe her position. The problem is that, as a nonacademic philosopher, Rand may not have been aware of the usual usage of that term in philosophy; at any rate, we are not entitled to assume that "egoism" in her mouth means what most philosophers mean by it, i.e., principle EE above.¹⁶ Instead, we need to look at her explanations of what egoism entails.

In fact, Rand rarely used the word "egoism," preferring to speak rather of "selfishness" or "rational selfishness." Nowhere in her works will one find a statement that looks like EE. Nor is there, to my knowledge, even the statement that a person should *always* pursue *only* his own welfare. What one will find is Rand's definition of "selfishness" as "concern with one's own interests" (vii). Concern with one's interest need not imply *exclusive* concern with one's own interests, so either Rand was speaking imprecisely and, uncharacteristically, saying something less strong than what she meant, or she did not, in advocating "selfishness," mean to advocate ethical egoism as I have defined it here.

Part of the evidence that Rand was not a true egoist,¹⁷ then, consists in her repeated failure, when given the opportunity, to say something quite as strong as ethical egoism would license one to say. Consider these examples:

To live for his own sake means that *the achievement of his own happiness is man's highest moral purpose.* (27)

EE would presumably imply that the achievement of his own happiness is one's *only* moral purpose. Why did she say only "highest"? Might the achievement of other people's happiness be a secondary purpose?

The moral purpose of a man's life is the achievement of his own happiness. This does not mean that he is indifferent to all men, that human life is of no value to him and that he has no reason to help others in an emergency. But it does mean that he does not *subordinate* his life to the welfare of others. (49)

In other words, he does not regard others' lives as *more important* than his own; this is compatible with attributing some non-instrumental value to their lives. Continuing the same passage:

... that he does not *sacrifice himself* to their needs, that the relief of their suffering is not his *primary* concern, that any help he gives is an *exception*, not a rule, an act of generosity, not of moral duty, that it is *marginal* and *incidental*... and that values, not disasters, are the goal, the *first* concern and the motive power of his life.¹⁸ (49)

All of which makes plain that one's *main* concern should be with one's own interests, which, again, is compatible with attributing some non-instrumental value to the interests of others. And again from the same essay:

[Consider] the issue of saving a drowning person. If the person to be saved is a stranger, it is morally proper to save him only when the danger to one's own life is minimal; when the danger is great, it would be immoral to attempt it: only a lack of self-esteem could permit one to value one's life no higher than that of a random stranger. (45)

Notice that the position Rand is attacking is that one should value a stranger's life *equally* with one's own; she is not attacking the position that one should value a stranger's life to some degree (even non-instrumentally), nor does she ever attack that position. So far, then, Rand seems to have studiously avoided asserting EE.

But there is still stronger evidence that Rand was not a true

ethical egoist:

But the creator is the egoist in the absolute sense, and the selfless man is the one who does not think, feel, judge or act. These are functions of the self.¹⁹ (Rand 1968, 681)

Particularly in view of the second sentence, this suggests that Rand intended "selfish" to mean something like, "having a well-developed self," implying a sort of independence of mind. This is corroborated by the following remarks:

The choice is not self-sacrifice or domination. The choice is independence or dependence. The code of the creator or the code of the second-hander. This is the basic issue. . . . The egoist in the absolute sense is not the man who sacrifices others. He is the man who stands above the need of using others in any manner. He does not function through them. He is not concerned with them in any primary matter. (681)

Man's first duty is to himself. His moral law is never to place his prime goal within the persons of others. His moral obligation is to do what he wishes, provided his wish does not depend *primarily* upon other men. (682)

Two things are noteworthy in these passages: first, that again Rand uses a qualifier, "primarily": "not . . . primarily" does not imply "not at all." The italics are Rand's, and Rand was never one to understate her point, so the qualification must be taken to be quite deliberate. Second, the "egoist" is defined as one who is not *dependent* on others. This is quite a bit different from the traditional definition of an egoist as a person who believes the only reason to do anything is that it serves his own interests. An "egoist" in Rand's sense might think there are lots of other reasons for doing things; the issue of not *needing* other people is orthogonal.

A puzzle might arise about how, on this interpretation, one who makes his living through trade could be a Randian "egoist," since

trade requires the presence of other people. I believe what Rand had in mind was rather that the trader *pulls his own weight*, so to speak—he produces equal value to the value he receives from others, and thus is, in a sense, supporting himself, as opposed to requiring others to support him.²⁰ This is consistent with principles P1 and P2. In addition, there is a psychological sense of “independence,” which may be the most important sense for Rand: a psychologically independent person neither depends upon others for his sense of self-esteem nor rests his values and other philosophical beliefs on conformity with the beliefs of others (Rand 1957, 943, 945).

Obviously, this interpretation removes the putative tension in Rand’s moral philosophy between EE and P2, by removing EE. According to this interpretation of her position, Rand no longer need try to defend P2 by arguing, implausibly, that violating others’ rights will always harm the agent. It is now open to her to defend both P1 and P2 by appealing to the absolute value of each individual life and (for P2) the idea that recognition of rights is necessary to preserve the life of the rights-bearer. Moore’s objection goes by the wayside, if Rand was not in fact defending EE.

There are two remaining problems for this interpretation. First, given what we have just said, why did Rand in fact try to defend P2 by claiming that rights-violations would always harm the violator, since she already had another much more plausible way of grounding individual rights? I suggest two possible explanations: (a) She may have wanted simply to provide *additional* support for P2: not only is it wrong to violate others’ rights because of the intrinsic value of others’ lives, but it won’t even satisfy your aims anyway; (b) It is possible that Rand did not clearly distinguish between the two meanings of “egoism” that we have just identified, viz. egoism as independence and egoism as exclusive pursuit of self-interest. If so, this would explain why she thought she had to defend P2 by appeal to the second sort of “egoism” even though she had a better defense based on the first sort of “egoism.”

Second, however, a more serious problem arises when considering Rand’s meta-ethical theories. What did she mean when she said, “The concept ‘value’ . . . presupposes an answer to the question: of

value to *whom*” (Rand 1964, 15), and “the good is an aspect of reality in relation to man” (Rand 1966, 14). Doesn’t this assert the agent-relative conception of value, thereby creating a problem for the defense of P2? Perhaps—but this is far from clear. Consider three possible interpretations of Rand’s remarks:

1. Value is agent-relative. A thing can be good only relative to some being; the same event might be good for one being and not good for another.
2. A thing is good only if it benefits someone.
3. A thing is valued only if there is some being who values it.

Notice that these are three distinct and logically independent statements. We have already discussed (1). (2) is compatible with (1), of course, but it is also fully compatible with an absolutist conception of value. It may be that the only things that are absolutely good are the things (the events and states of affairs) that benefit people. More plausibly, it may be that the only intrinsically, absolutely good thing is happiness, or flourishing, or something else that constitutes a ‘benefit.’

As an illustration of this point, compare utilitarianism as an ethical theory. Utilitarians accept (2), since they think happiness is the sole intrinsic value. But they reject (1), since they think the happiness of any person is good absolutely, not just good relative to that individual. This is, of course, what leads utilitarians to believe that every person has equal reason to aim at the happiness of any person; however, one need not draw that conclusion in order merely to see that (1) and (2) are logically independent. The confusion between (1) and (2) is most unfortunately aided by the possibility of equivocating on “is good for,” as meaning either “benefits” or “is good relative to”; note that the final clause of (1) is to be interpreted along the lines of the latter, i.e., so that it is analogous to the relativist thesis in (4) below.

Statement (3) is logically unrelated to either of the statements preceding it, since (3) concerns, not the nature of the good, but the

nature of the act or process of *regarding* something as good ("valuing"). Thus, the relationship between (1) and (3) above is like the relationship between (4) and (5) below:

4. Existence is perceiver-relative. A thing can exist only relative to some perceiver; the same object might exist for one person and not for another.
5. A thing is perceived only if there is some being who perceives it.

(1) does not follow from (3), just as (4) does not follow from (5). We can see that the inference from (5) to (4) would be invalid, since (5) is trivially true, whereas (4) is trivially false (notwithstanding that this inference is the major basis for relativism in philosophy).

Now, this is the important point: Rand's remarks need not be interpreted along the lines of (1). She may instead have had in mind (2) or (3) (possibly both). In both cases, her failure to see a need to justify the remarks would be rendered more understandable. (3), like (5), is trivially true. (2) is non-trivial but nevertheless highly plausible initially. Evidence that Rand actually meant (3) is found in her definition of "value," immediately preceding the "of value to whom" remark, as "that which one acts to gain and/or keep" (Rand 1964, 15): this suggests that by "value," she means "that which is regarded as good," rather than "that which is good," since a person acts to gain something when he regards it as good, not necessarily when it is objectively good, and Rand was certainly aware of this last point.²¹ Given her use of "value," the claim that the concept of value presupposes an answer to the question, "Of value to whom?" may merely mean that the idea of X's being regarded as good presupposes someone who regards X as good—an innocuous truism.

On the other hand, evidence that Rand had in mind (2) appears in her description of the "intrinsic" theory of value, intended as a contrast to her own view, which precedes the "aspect of reality in relation to man" remark: "The *intrinsic* theory holds that the good is inherent in certain things or actions as such, regardless of their context and consequences, regardless of any benefit or injury they

may cause to the actors and subjects involved" (Rand 1966, 14). The intrinsic theory, in other words, is a denial of (2); in fact, it is much stronger than that: it is, apparently, the view that benefits to individuals are *completely irrelevant* to what is good or bad. I am not aware of anyone who has held such a view; in any case, a review of Moore's above-quoted remarks on absolute value should convince the reader that he asserted no such thesis as this; the intrinsic theory, therefore, is not the absolutist conception of value.

Thus, it seems that the two remarks in which Rand initially appears to be putting forth the agent-relative conception of value as in (1), are better interpreted, respectively, as putting forward theses (3) and (2), both of which are entirely acceptable to an absolutist.

Another unfortunate possibility to consider is that Rand simply did not distinguish claims (1), (2), and (3) from one another, with the result that there is no fact of the matter as to what she meant. In numerous discussions of Rand and Objectivism over the years, I have never seen this distinction drawn, other than by myself, which suggests that the confusion is easily made. Confusion between (1) and (2) would be quite sufficient to lead one mistakenly to think that a thing is good relative to an individual only if it benefits *him*, and from there to conclude that an individual can only have reason for doing what benefits himself, thus endorsing EE. After that, a further confusion between EE and (3) (or, more precisely, between "value" and "good"), in turn, might enable one to think that sacrificing others would not be "selfish," provided one does not "value" such sacrifices (thereby making them not "good for oneself").

The three-way confusion among (1), (2), and (3) appears to be operative in this passage:

"Sacrifice" is the surrender of a greater value for the sake of a lesser one or of a nonvalue. Thus, altruism gauges a man's virtue by the degree to which he surrenders, renounces or betrays his values. . . . The rational principle of conduct is the exact opposite: always act in accordance with the hierarchy of your values. (Rand 1964, 44)

How should we understand this argument? Altruists, presumably, believe something like this:

A: You should often sacrifice your own interests (for the benefit of others).

How does Rand transform that into the view that you should betray your values? It seems that two stages are involved: First, substitute for "your own interests," "what is good for you." Second, substitute for "what is good for you," "what you regard as good (i.e., your values)." We then get:

A': You should often sacrifice your values (for the benefit of others).

The first substitution involves the confusion between (1) and (2), or more precisely, between "benefits" and "is good relative to." The second substitution involves the confusion between "is good relative to" and "is valued by." The fact that Rand could regard A as equivalent to A', then, shows that she probably made these mistakes.²²

Conclusion

The answer to the title question of this essay depends upon the meaning of "egoism." Given the received interpretation of the word (provided by EE), a doctrine of benevolent, or even minimally rights-respecting, egoism is probably not coherent, in that there seem to be no arguments capable of resolving the *prima facie* tension between the two parts of the doctrine. An argument for rights-respecting behavior based on the claim that rights-violations can never benefit the agent would conflict with well-known empirical facts, including, for example, the modern history of government. And an argument for rights-respecting behavior based upon the intrinsic value of the individual will face a dilemma: if one employs an agent-relative conception of value, then the intrinsic value of each individual life will provide no reason for an ethical egoist to respect others' lives;

whereas if one employs an absolute conception of value, then ethical egoism can be shown to be contradictory, as in Moore's objection. In general, the would-be egoist, in defending the principle of individual rights, must either make extremely implausible empirical claims, or else allow the interests of others to count in his own deliberations in just the way that EE forbids.

However, if "egoism" is interpreted in the manner suggested in the preceding section, a coherent doctrine can be constructed. In this interpretation, an "egoist" (better named an "individualist") believes that each individual life is intrinsically valuable in an *absolute* sense. This, in turn, coheres with the moral principle that no individual life should be sacrificed for the sake of another individual or group—thus leading us to both P1 and P2, where EE was only able to give us P1. The individualist of this stripe remains free to accept the intuitively plausible principles (2) that a thing is good only if it benefits someone and (3) that a thing is valued only if there is someone who values it, even while he rejects the idea (1) that all value facts are agent-relative.

It is difficult to determine which interpretation has the better claim to being Rand's true theory, and I do not claim to have resolved that question here. I *have* tried to show that the first interpretation is by no means inevitable, that Rand nowhere clearly asserts EE, and, in particular, that the passages that initially seem to support an agent-relative conception of value can plausibly be interpreted otherwise. There remains the unfortunate possibility that Rand herself failed to distinguish the two possible theories, even in her own mind. Nevertheless, as any admirer of Ayn Rand's work will appreciate,²³ the most important issue here is not what is *Rand's* theory, but rather which is the more reasonable ethical theory. And that is a question which, I think, is not difficult to answer at all.

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Notes

1. This is the subtitle on the title page of *The Virtue of Selfishness*.
2. These principles are supposed to apply to all rational beings; the theory is that no rational being should sacrifice himself for the benefit of others, and so forth.
3. This implies that the fact that an action would serve my own interests is a reason for doing it (provided it is true that the thing would serve my interests). See Rand 1964, 25, 27.
4. This seems to be true by virtue of the meaning of "sacrifice." Rand (1964, 44), however, argues against "sacrificing" in general; she seems to think that "sacrifice" means 'giving up a greater value to obtain a lesser one.' My argument does not depend on this strong interpretation of "sacrifice"; it only depends on the fact that "sacrificing oneself for the benefit of others" entails (predictably) ending up worse off.
5. See Rand 1964, 15 and 1966, 14. But see also my discussion below of the interpretation of these remarks, under "Was Rand an Egoist?"
6. On these points see Rand 1988, 215; Rand 1964, 32; and Rand 1957, 949.
7. Contrast Rand 1964, 93–94, where Rand opines that rights are necessary for human survival, and Rand 1964, 23, where she writes: "Such looters are parasites incapable of survival, who exist by destroying those who *are* capable."
8. I owe this point to Bryan Caplan, who puts it in economic terms: "A parasite will want to hit the maximum point on his victims' Laffer Curve. The Laffer Curve normally shows tax revenues raised as a function of tax rates. Revenues are 0 at 0% tax (mathematically) and 0 at 100% tax (no incentive to work), so they reach a maximum somewhere in the middle. A rational exploiter keeps raising the rate of exploitation until demanding a larger fraction yields a smaller result" (Caplan, personal communication).
9. Difficult to resist is the comparison to Kant's categorical imperative: "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only" (Kant 1959, 47). Nozick (1974, 30–33) argues persuasively that this principle leads to respect for individual rights. However, see the qualification in note 12 below.
10. This problem is briefly discussed in King 1984, 119–20.
11. See Mack 1984, 152ff., for further discussion of this problem.
12. I say this can be inferred "*prima facie*" because I see no way to derive an absolute (exceptionless) principle of individual rights from these kinds of considerations. Suppose that A, B, and C are each ends in themselves. Then it follows that I should not sacrifice A for no reason; but it does not follow that I should not sacrifice A if by doing so I could preserve B and C from destruction. It may well be true for some reason that I should not so sacrifice A, but that certainly does not *follow* from the mere fact that A is good for its own sake; being good for its own sake does not entail having *infinite* value, such that its value could never be outweighed. But this problem is extraneous to our main purpose.

13. An altruistic reading of the phrase is possible, according to which "man's survival *qua* man" refers to the survival of mankind *in general*—that is, everyone—*qua* man, but this would not cohere with ethical egoism, nor with individualism more generally.
14. Branden (1964) seems to regard self-esteem as the essence of mental health, going so far as to characterize ideas that undermine self-esteem as "spiritual murder" (42).
15. Due to the diminishing marginal utility of money, \$10,000 does not have a fixed value; the \$10,000 in case A may be worth less to me than the \$10,000 in case B. If so, just increase the amount at stake in case A—say, to \$20,000.
16. As Sciabarra argues, Rand aimed to alter the meanings of words, such as "selfish" (Sciabarra 1995, 252) and "capitalism" (283–84), whose traditional meanings she felt reflected philosophical errors.
17. By a "true egoist," of course, I mean someone who subscribes to EE as I have stated it above.
18. I have altered the placement of italics in the last two quotations to emphasize my point.
19. Reading "egoist" for "egotist," here and in the following quotation, per Rand's remark at Rand 1968, viii.
20. See, for example, Rand 1964, 31; Rand 1966, 19. Contrast Rand 1964, 33, about the holdup man. This idea is presumably to be interpreted as follows: what I trade should have at least equal value *to my trading partner* as the thing I seek to gain from him, so that I am not asking for charity from him.
21. Rand frequently criticizes people for pursuing what isn't good. See for example, Rand 1964, 24.
22. That A differs from A' is obvious once one realizes that the altruist is recommending that you *value* other people highly. If you value other people highly, sacrificing your own *interests* to help them would not be sacrificing your *values*. It is for this sort of reason that no moral theory advocates the sacrificing of one's values.
23. Barring, perhaps, those individuals with a strong interest in defining official Objectivist doctrine. See Peikoff 1991, xiv–xv; cf. the concluding paragraphs of Peikoff 1989.

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