JudgeSabo
Ayn Rand's Second-Hand Ethics
Feigned Objectivity in the Objectivist Ethics
03/08/2025

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What actually matters in Rand's work was not any particular part of her argument *per se*, but this kind of arrogant attitude and dismissiveness it cultivated in its audience. While Objectivism specifically never became dominant in American politics in the way Rand hoped, and never will, Rand was a genuine pioneer in finding the rhetorical techniques needed to sell the most extreme forms of capitalism to the American public: lies, ignorance, fear, and hatred.

like Rand, claimed to be making bold new discoveries to establish ethics as a science, but ended up only recreating a very crude version of utilitarianism. He argues that the only reasonable thing we can value in ethics is well-being, a term he leaves quite vague, and one which he seems to even contradict himself since he also says we should value other things too which are not defined in terms of well-being (e.g. scientific truth). To boost his claim that his rather shoddy work is really the establishment of a new science, he needs to, also like Rand, be similarly dismissive of the entire field of ethics, presenting it merely as a gross and simplistic caricature compared to which his own theory stands out. Čeika summarizes it like this:

> Reading Harris's book, you could get the impression that what ethicists in current debates argue about is whether we should be serial killers or not, and Harris's breakthrough is to simply say 'No! You should think about well-being!' But this does not even begin to address any of the difficult questions actually being discussed in ethical discussions.

Dealing with Ayn Rand is quite similar. In her world, ethicists are just constantly throwing up their hands saying ethics is merely a matter of whims which we cannot understand or explain, and her breakthrough is to go 'No! You need to use reason!'

Her presentation of philosophy as a whole is laughably misinformed, and when it comes to actually presenting her own argument, she is making wildly unjustified assumptions and leaps in logic, claiming that only living beings might exist or not exist or contradicting herself on whether or not physical survival is the ultimate value. All of this was meant to build towards her ultimate political principle, what she called the non-initiation principle, which fails for reasons I cover here.

Ayn Rand is a fascinating figure in the history of right-wing laissez-faire politics. She was primarily known, and is still remembered today, as the author of the novels *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, acting as a "radical for capitalism" even within a deeply capitalist society. For Rand, this was a matter of painting an unapologetic defense of capitalism. In contrast to other conservatives of the time who felt they needed to temper their praise of capitalism with calls for Christian compassion for the poor and condemnations of greed, Rand wanted to turn selfishness into a virtue.

Rand's novels served as vehicles for developing and presenting her kind of Nietzschean worldview, presenting our modern world as a kind of dystopia plagued by an altruistic moral system that rejects reason in favor of feelings like compassion, but is in reality really rooted in jealousy and hatred of the successful and inevitably leads to disaster. This is contrasted to the self-interested morality of her heroes, whose strength distinguishes them from the rest of mankind who are dependent upon them, but are permitted to look up at them in admiration, and who would enjoy fantastic wealth if only the government would get out of the way of business.

It was fundamental to Rand's worldview that there really was this kind of contrast. The state of the world, and of ethical philosophy in general, was in such a sorry state that suggesting "Hey, what if we tried to apply reason to ethics?" would count as some great new philosophical innovation on her part. Believing she represented some break with the rest of philosophy, she named her own system of thought "Objectivism" because it was based on 'objective reality.[1] She wrote many books and essays to develop this further, claiming that by reason she was coherently answering all major questions with regard to metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, politics, and aesthetics. It promised her followers a kind of 'round universe.'[2]

"Objectivism" is, as I will show, mostly nonsense. What Rand presents as a triumph of reason was, if anything, a tri-

umph of rhetoric. Her strongest arguments were just unoriginal, usually just poorly understood versions of Lockean political philosophy, while her original arguments were effectively always original errors, like how we can distinguish her Non-Initiation Principle as derivative but not identical with John Stuart Mill's much earlier Harm Principle. Her radical language was very clearly influenced by Nietzsche, while her basic ethics is clearly just taken from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Normally I would not be so negative on someone merely for being influenced by thinkers who came before them. We all develop within society and we build on the work of the generations that came before us. However, Rand was in complete denial about her intellectual debt to any philosopher, except to Aristotle's logic.[3] It was vital to her worldview to deny any such debt since that would directly conflict with the narrative of her books, namely that she is presenting some radical new philosophy that would save the world but which everyone else is opposed to. Any discussion Rand gives of the history of philosophy needs to grossly distort the record to maintain this impression of her as an outsider and iconoclast.

While "Objectivism" never really took off, Rand's influence can still be distinctly felt within right-wing politics, especially around the misnamed "libertarian" movement, more accurately called propertarianism. So too have many of her misrepresentations of the history of philosophy remained popular. To give a very direct example that has had immense influence, the modern right-wing's obsession with 'postmodernism' as an enemy has been greatly popularized through Jordan Peterson, whose own view is largely pulled from Stephen Hicks' *Explaining Postmodernism*, which itself wanted to explain the history of philosophy from an Objectivism perspective.[4] The errors Rand popularized are her most enduring legacy, even if not many would call themselves "Objectivists."

To explore the intellectual bankruptcy of her arguments and gross distortion of objective reality, this paper will be ex-

and objective facts, they are not and cannot be doing that since *is* and *ought* statements are categorically distinct.

Now imagine that Rand heard that this was a seriously discussed topic in philosophy and then, ignoring how Hume was *challenging* ethical philosophies he encountered, decided that every ethical philosopher actually agreed with Hume and declared that ethics was merely a matter of expressing whims. Then at some point she encounters utilitarianism and hears a basic critique of hedonism as a "doctrine worthy only of swine" and how it does not qualitatively distinguish between pleasures. Then later she encounters or hears about Kant, decides he's her mortal enemy, and dismisses him without bothering to fit him into this dynamic. Mix in with all this a general hatred of democracy and socialism telling her she has an obligation to care about other people, and we get this.

Conclusion

Ayn Rand was, first and foremost, selling her readers a narrative. In this narrative, you, a young propertarians with a passing familiarity with some ethical or political philosophy, are being told that greed is good and the issue with society is that we haven't tried capitalism hard enough. Seeing how this contradicts thousands of years of human wisdom, Rand presents herself as Zarathustra coming down the mountain to declare a new order of things, grounded in pure objective reality. But for all the emphasis around logic and reason, most of this actually works out to a kind of parody of better arguments mixed in with a very value-laden language distinguishing positions Rand likes from ones she doesn't, asserted with confidence to give the impression of logical certainty, combined with gross misrepresentations of her opposition.

I am reminded of Sam Harris' book "The Moral Landscape" and the critique made against it by Jonas Čeika here. Harris,

est evil, by avoiding the short and painful lives of people in the war of all against all. He didn't just replace God with society. Rousseau has maybe one of the closer ideas because his politics involves a view towards the "general will" as a test of political legitimacy, which is a somewhat ambiguous phrase that might mean the state aligning with democratically made decisions in a common assembly or might mean some kind of transcendent view looking toward the common interest of all citizens, but neither interpretation here is the circulation definition of "the good is the good of society." It is a description of political legitimacy, not the good. As for Locke, Rand is directly lifting a lot of her natural rights argument directly from him when it comes to justifying capitalism, so it's safe to say she doesn't mean him either.

Marxism? Rand certainly had little love for Marx, but Marx very deliberately *avoided* grounding his critique of capitalism in ethical terms. Trying to define "the good" was not something he was interested in, and instead tended to treat morality as something that was historically contingent, developing according to certain class interests.

Rand does not engage with any of this. She does not name who she had in mind or cite even a single example. She does not base her analysis on any facts of reality, but simply her own feelings about what other people are saying.

It is hard to see how Rand could have seriously engaged the literature of ethical philosophy and come away with this impression. That is unless we apply my telephone-game theory of how Rand understood philosophical history.

Imagine for a moment that someone once described Hume's Is-Ought Problem to her, which we know she was aware of because she references it within this essay. According to Hume, a major problem with every ethical system he read is that it made an unsupported transition from descriptive claims on how the world *is* into prescriptive claims about what we *ought* to do. While ethicists claim they are basing their morality on reason

ploring one of her shorter essays "The Objectivist Ethics." In it, she tries to explain the history of ethics and the Manichean 'black and white' view she has on it, while also showing how her actual positive arguments for her own point of view fail in very basic ways even as they are meant to provide the groundwork for the rest of her political thought.

I am not the first person to notice these errors. Michael Huemer, despite being mostly politically aligned with Rand as an "anarcho"-capitalist, provided a very admirable critique of all the problems with this essay here. Take this as a sign of just how glaring these flaws of "Objectivism" really are!

Before continuing, please read through her paper in full to have the full context of what I am critiquing. An audio version is here.

Summary of The Objectivist Ethics

It is easy to be wrong very quickly. Explaining why someone is wrong takes more time and effort to both establish the truth and demonstrate how someone gets things wrong. One of the issues I face with this particular argument from Rand is that she makes several unjustifiable leaps of logic. If I try to summarize what her actual argument is, that means I either highlight these problems now and risk accusations of making a straw man out of her, or I actively try to massage her argument so it seems better than it actually is.

I will try to err on the latter side, hoping to "steelman" her argument before I explain where she goes wrong in more detail. I will also not focus too much on her comments about the history of philosophy and instead focus on the more positive case she makes for her own ethics.

I have also divided her paper into 5 sections to help focus on her points and divide up my own critique accordingly.

1. The Objectivist Narrative on Philosophical History

Rand begins her essay rather dramatically, claiming that society is facing disaster because of a crisis of morality. But the issue is not that people are not sufficiently living up to our moral code, but that our moral code itself is wrong. The issue, in Rand's mind, is that the vast majority of ethical philosophers reject reason, instead seeing ethics as the province of irrational 'whims' which they do not know the cause of nor try to discover.

> No philosopher has given a rational, objectively demonstrable, scientific answer to the question of why man needs a code of values. So long as that question remained unanswered, no rational, scientific, objective code of ethics could be discovered or defined.

In Rand's view, almost all ethical systems fall into one of two mystical camps appealing to whim: (1) those who appeal to the whim of God, and (2) those who appeal to the whim of 'society,' by which they always mean some small body of men said to represent society. While these camps may disagree with one another, they all reject trying to use reason in ethics.

Rand sees herself as the pioneer and discoverer of a real rational, scientific "objective" ethical system, placing herself opposed to all ethical philosophers before her who never thought to try that before, and consequently have brought the world to the brink of collapse.

> If you wonder why the world is now collapsing to a lower and ever lower rung of hell, *this* is the reason.

So Rand's criticism does not apply to arguably the most influential philosopher in modern history. Are there other major schools of thought she might have in mind?

Maybe she's thinking of utilitarianism. They perhaps support something *close* to this, saying ethics is about acting in ways that maximize the overall utility of everyone involved, but crucially this is not making the kind of circular argument Rand is presenting. Instead, it tends to define utility in terms of happiness, pleasure, well-being, and so on. Later in the essay Rand does present a critique of 'social hedonism' which does support the idea she read utilitarianism, essentially being about accommodating the "selfless whims" of others, but that is a very different critique from saying it means just supporting a dictatorship. It is hard to imagine Rand reading something like John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* and coming away thinking he must support whatever gang happens to say it represents society, despite the fact that she lists him explicitly as one of the social hedonists she had in mind. I'm fairly confident she could not find any such position in Henry Sidgwick either.

Maybe Rand was thinking of ethical intuitionism. She might have been aware of G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica*, and she certainly hated the word "intuition." But I think Moore's position resembles Rand's own position more than what she is critiquing here. She claims that most people are giving a circular definition of "the good" by appealing to "the good of society." Moore certainly never claims this, precisely because his point is that "the good" is undefinable, and warned against falling into circular definitions like in the naturalistic fallacy. If Moore found anyone defining the good in terms of the good of society, he would call that out just like Rand did.

Contractualism? One can certainly find in Hobbes a call for absolute monarchism in a way Rand would likely object to, but he explicitly did not appeal to anything like the "good of society." Rather, he based his argument, not on trying to achieve the good, but avoiding the *summum malum*, the great-

He does claim that this includes the duty that we should treat other people as "ends in themselves." While Rand considered Kant's philosophy to be the exact opposite of Objectivism, she actually directly endorses and adopts Kant's formula within this very essay (without crediting him, of course).

Compare these quotes:

> **Kant**: I maintain that man—and in general every rational being—exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be used by this or that will at its discretion. Whenever he acts in ways directed towards himself or towards other rational beings, a person serves as a means to whatever end his action aims at; but he must always be regarded as also an end. (Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*)
>
> **Rand**: 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. (Ayn Rand, The Objectivist Ethics)

(Also note that Kant is more careful with his words. He says that people are not to be used *merely* as means, remembering they are *also* an end. Rand just says people cannot be used as means to any end whatsoever.)

It would certainly be laughable to say Kant was "not concerned" with the "metaphysical cause or objective validation" of ethics either, given how extensively he wrote on the topic. Even if Rand despised his answer (or how she misread his answer while also copying parts she liked), he still answered it.

> If you want to save civilization, it is *this* premise of modern ethics — and of all ethical history — that you must challenge.

Now we may examine what this "objectivist" ethics looks like, as a radical break from anything that ever came before it and with air-tight reasoning that is scientifically unchallengeable with no glaring flaws whatsoever.

2. Rand's Idea of Value

Rand holds that ethics must begin as an investigation of 'value,' determining what values are and why we need them.

She defines a value as "that which one acts to gain and/or keep." Values are therefore inherently agent-relative, presupposing there is someone who is acting to gain and/or keep something.

Furthermore, this definition also implies that the value's existence is conditional. It faces an alternative of existence of non-existence. Rand presumably thinks this because, if the agent did not at least believe what they value might not exist, they would see no need to act to gain and/or keep it.

The only thing that faces this alternative of existence or non-existence is living organisms. The existence of inanimate matter is unconditional. By this, Rand presumably means something like the law of conservation of mass. Only the existence of life is conditional, facing the alternative of non-existence or death, leaving behind only its chemical elements.

Rand defines life as "a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action." Rand concludes that only living

From this, she concludes that:

> It is only the concept of 'Life' that makes the concept of 'Value' possible. It is only to a living entity that things can be good or evil.

Rand tries to illustrate this with an analogy:

> To make this point fully clear, try to imagine an immortal, indestructible robot, an entity which moves and acts, but which cannot be affected by anything, which cannot be changed in any respect, which cannot be damaged, injured, or destroyed. Such an entity would not be able to have any values; it would have nothing to gain or to lose; it could not regard anything as *for* or *against* it, as serving or threatening its welfare, as fulfilling or frustrating its interests. It could have no interests and no goals.

We will have quite a bit to say about this analogy, which Rand thinks actually defends and clarifies her view rather than debunking it, later.

3. Life (Survival) as the Ultimate Value

Rand argues that only living entities can have values. She also argues that *all* living entities have values, including single-celled organisms, because all living things are "a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action."

> On the *physical* level, the functions of all living organisms, from the simplest to the most complex — from the nutritive function in the single cell of an amoeba to the blood circulation in the body of a man — are actions generated by the organism itself and directed to a single goal: the maintenance of the organism's life.

It seems like Rand's conclusion here confused some of her readers, so she added this footnote:

of *justice*, perhaps, as whatever achieves the greatest good for the greatest number, but in that case they define what is good for each individual in some other way (e.g. minimizing pain, maximizing pleasure or freedom, etc.) precisely to avoid the kind of circularity Rand warns about. Rand claims this is the dominant view in the world today, but I can't think of a single ethical philosopher who has proposed it.

Certainly you can find a lot of ethical philosophers who consider the good of society *important*, but that would also include Rand. The way she constantly emphasizes why ethics is so important is that it is needed to save the world, to save civilization.

> If you wonder why the world is now collapsing to a lower and ever lower rung of hell, *this* is the reason.
>
> If you want to save civilization, it is *this* premise of modern ethics — and of all ethical history — that you must challenge.

My impression here is that, whenever Rand started talking about greed or egoism or her laissez-faire capitalist policy proposals, an obvious challenge she was met was people pointing out that this was deeply socially harmful. To dismiss these concerns, she repackaged all these objections with any hint of social responsibility into something she could more easily dismiss as some new replacement for divine command theory. I don't think she has any particular philosophers in mind.

Let's be charitable and say Rand isn't just taking this lazy option. What ethical philosophers might she have in mind when making this critique?

Does this apply to Kant's categorical imperative? Definitely not. Kant never appeals to the good of society as the definition of the good. Instead, he believed ethics is our duty to uphold the categorical imperative derived from pure practical reason.

but this is clearly a different kind of relationship between the divine and the good than theological voluntarism, and cannot be reduced to the 'mystical, arbitrary, unaccountable will of God.'

Ayn Rand vs "Neomystics"

What then of Rand's take on nonreligious ethics? She seems to think it is little more than people suggesting a "societal command theory" as a way to replace "divine command theory."

> The avowed mystics held the arbitrary, unaccountable "will of God" as the standard of the good and as the validation of their ethics. The neomystics replaced it with "the good of society," thus collapsing into the circularity of the definition such as "the standard of the good is that which is good for society." This meant, in logic — and, today, in worldwide practice — that "society" stands above any principle of ethics, since *it* is the source, standard and criterion of ethics, since "the good" is whatever *it* wills, whatever *it* happens to assert as its own welfare and pleasure. This meant that "society" may do anything it pleases, since "the good" is whatever it chooses to do *because* it chooses to do it. And — since there is no such entity as "society," since society is only a number of individual men — this meant that *some* men (the majority or any gang that claims to be its spokesman) are ethically entitled to pursue any whims (or any atrocities) they desire to pursue, while *other* men are ethically obliged to spend their lives in the service of the gang's desires.

I can think of no ethical philosopher who has ever proposed the good of society as the standard of the good. As a standard

> When applied to physical phenomena, such as the automatic functions of an organism, the term "goal-directed" is not to be taken to mean "purposive" (a concept applicable only to the actions of a consciousness) and is not to imply the existence of any teleological principle operating in insentient nature. I use the term "goal-directed," in this context, to designate the fact that the automatic functions of living organisms are actions whose nature is such that they *result* in the preservation of an organism's life.

Rand's idea of value is therefore entirely divorced from any idea about the will. Even living organisms that completely lack any kind of consciousness, like an amoeba or a tree, have "values" and "act to gain and/or keep," despite them not *willfully* acting.

The reason the robot couldn't have values before was not because it was not conscious, but merely because it was indestructible.

I think Rand's argument is highly confused here, and given this footnote I don't think I'm the only one. Even with its inclusion, I think she could have made her argument in a simpler and much more direct way.

As it stands, her reasoning seems to be something like this: *"A value is something which anything acts to gain and/or keep. By 'act' I do not merely mean conscious or 'purposive' actions, but anything that is of such a nature that its behavior achieves some result. Now if a result is being achieved, then this implies the possibility of it not being achieved if the action did not take place. Therefore, only contingent things, i.e. things that may or may not exist, can be values. Now the only contingent thing in existence is life, as living things can die but inanimate matter cannot be destroyed. Therefore life is the only possible value. Moreover, life is defined as a process of self-sustaining action. All living organisms*

therefore always act to sustain their own life, including organisms that lack consciousness like an amoeba. Therefore all living organisms value their own life, even if they do not consciously value it."

Rand's argument continues. She says that life depends on two things: (1) its external environment for means of subsistence (its "fuel"), and (2) the proper use of that "fuel."[5]

What constitutes the "proper" use of "fuel" depends on the specific nature of the living organism.

> What standard determines what is *proper* in this context? The standard is the organism's life, or: that which is required for the organism's survival.

It is important to emphasize how, in this part of Rand's argument, life here and the standard it imposes on each organism is strictly understood in terms of survival. The only standard Rand is admitting is what gives the organism the best chance at living as long as possible. This is a value shared by all living organisms, including the humble amoeba. Physical death is what is being avoided, and crippled or diseased states are recognized by bringing people closer to death.

As for now, Rand argues that life serves as the 'ultimate value' for all living things, to which *all* other goals are the means. By having this ultimate value of "that which is required for the organism's survival," we have a standard by which to evaluate all other lesser values.

> An *ultimate* value is that final goal or end to which all lesser goals are the means — and it sets the standard by which all lesser goals are *evaluated.* An organism's life is the *standard of value*: that which furthers its life is the *good*, that which threatens it is the *evil.*

the will of God. What God approves of is good, what God disapproves of is evil.

But if Rand is pointing out that divine 'whim' seems like an insufficient basis for ethics, she is hardly the first person to point this out. The problem of arbitrariness in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy page on theological voluntarism. People have pointed this out for literally thousands of years too. If you have taken a Philosophy 101 class, there is a strong chance you had to read Plato's *Euthyphro.* This dialogue famously has Socrates pose to Euthyphro the question "whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods." If it is the former, then the gods (or God in monotheism) decision to love something seems baseless. If it is the latter, then it seems like we cannot explain what makes something holy or good by appealing to what the gods love. This question is generally known as the Euthyphro dilemma, and any theological voluntarist worth mentioning will have addressed it in some capacity.

Now, perhaps Rand believes this objection is decisive against this theory, and any attempt to salvage it has failed. But what she cannot rightly claim is that philosophers have taken "the existence of ethics for granted" and were "not concerned with discovering its metaphysical cause or objective validation." This is, in fact, one of the first and most basic questions any divine command theorist has been asking for the last few thousand years.

A bigger issue Rand faces is that other theistic ethical theories exist that don't appeal to divine 'whim'. Religious philosophers like Thomas Aquinas have proposed that, besides the "divine law" of God's revealed commands, there is also a "natural law" which determines what is good or bad for us according to our own natures, and which we can access by studying and reasoning about human nature. God has a hand in this as the creator and sustainer of the universe, of nature itself, and can therefore still be considered the ultimate source of morality,

Ayn Rand vs "Mystics"

Besides Aristotle, Rand broadly categorized most ethical philosophers into one of two camps: those who appeal to the whims of God, and those who appeal to the whims of society. As they are appealing to whim, neither have engaged in any metaethics.

> Most philosophers took the existence of ethics for granted, as the given, as a historical fact, and were not concerned with discovering its metaphysical cause or objective validation. Many of them attempted to break the traditional monopoly of mysticism in the field of ethics and, allegedly, to define a rational, scientific, nonreligious morality. But their attempts consisted of trying to justify them on *social* grounds, merely substituting *society* for *God*.

Rand is making a very sweeping and damning claim about ethical philosophy, but without naming any examples of who she has in mind. It seems she is mostly hoping we just take her at her word.

Or, given my 'telephone' theory, she may have had a few things described to her and this was her takeaway. To start, I think it's obvious enough that, as far as these categories worked, Rand was aware that religious people often appeal to God when making moral proclamations, but also aware that not all philosophers appealed to God.

I am not aware of any philosophers who have said "God just has random whims and that determines morality," but there are some who have some superficial resemblance. This seems like a particularly simplistic version of Divine Command Theory or Theological Voluntarism more generally. According to these theories, the determining factor of what makes something good or evil, or at least an extremely relevant factor, is

Rand believes that, through this argument, she has solved Hume's Is-Ought Problem. She believes she has established that all life, because it is a living thing, must value its own life, deriving an 'ought' from an 'is.'

4. Value and "Higher" Forms of Life

Rand moves on to how humans first discover values. In the simplest form, we first see it through the sensation of pleasure and pain. This is the most basic and automatic way we come to recognize values. Pleasure drives us to what is life-promoting, and pain drives us from what is life-negating.

Humans are not the only animals that feel pleasure and pain. It is common to all animals with consciousness, and for all of them serves as "the basic means of survival."

Rand then starts to introduce a kind of hierarchy to the different forms of life.

Rand argues that the 'simpler' forms of life, like plants, lack consciousness, surviving only by automatic functions.

Consciousness however is possessed by "higher organisms." The most basic kind of conscious organism has sensation. If this is all that is possessed, they are guided strictly by pleasure and pain, which is similarly automatic.

A step up from here allows sensations to be retained, it is 'perception,' integrating various sensations as a kind of awareness. With this comes certain skills like hunting or hiding.

For all of these creatures, their code of values is meant to be automatic. Man, however, is different, supposedly lacking any such automatic code. Instead, this code must be discovered.

> Man, the highest living species on this earth — the being whose consciousness has a limitless capacity for gaining knowledge — man is the only living entity born without any guarantee of *remaining* conscious at all. Man's particular distinction from all

> other living species is the fact that *his* consciousness is *volitional*.

Man uses conceptual knowledge. A concept is defined as a mental integration of at least two "perceptual concretes" which are isolated by "abstraction" and then united in a definition. While the human brain creates precepts automatically, this process of abstraction and concept-formation is not. It is instead directed by "reason" to draw grasping relations and differences and make inferences and deductions.

Thinking is exercised by choice, requiring some effort, focusing our awareness. To unfocus the mind is to only have a subhuman level of consciousness.

Rand considers this a grave decision:

> Psychologically, the choice "to think or not" is the choice "to focus or not." Existentially, the choice "to focus or not" is the choice "to be conscious or not." Metaphysically, the choice "to be conscious or not" is the choice of life or death.

Man lacks the instincts of lower animals, and cannot survive on merely automatic processes seen in plant life. Reason is needed to survive, and must be actively chosen.

Since we do not automatically have knowledge, we also need to go through this process of discovery to find out what is true.

This means we also need to discover what is right or wrong, what is good or evil. What is needed for survival is already determined by our nature, and what achieves and promotes this is what is discovered.

What is or is not a value is not a matter of choice then, but only whether we choose to strive to discover it or not.

> function of a lyre-player is to play the lyre, and that of a good lyre-player is to do so well): if this is the case, and we state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man to be the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case, human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete. (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 1, Ch. 7)

There are clear parallels here to Rand's argument.

In common with Aristotle, we find an attempt to identify the "chief good" or "ultimate value," a progression moving from the nonconscious life of plants to the conscious life of animals to the rational life of humanity, and the ultimate identification of goodness and virtue with the proper and harmonious application of reason to our lives.

What we find missing in Aristotle is the claim that life *in general*, mere survival, is the ultimate value, which Aristotle dismisses precisely because "the life of nutrition and growth" is shared in common with even plants, all the nonsense about only living things facing alternatives of existence or non-existence, the confusing robot analogy, and of course any hint that humans, who Aristotle identifies as a social animal, should be egoists and support laissez-faire capitalism.

It seems that the only things original to Ayn Rand are her errors.

This is how Rand deals with philosophers she likes. It doesn't get any better than this.

Presumably, however, to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude, and a clearer account of what it is still desired. This might perhaps be given, if we could first ascertain the function of man. For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or an artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function. Have the carpenter, then, and the tanner certain functions or activities, and has man none? Is he born without a function? Or as eye, hand, foot, and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all these? What then can this be? Life seems to be common even to plants, but we are seeking what is peculiar to man. Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception, but it also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox, and every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle; of this, one part has such a principle in the sense of being obedient to one, the other in the sense of possessing one and exercising thought. And, as 'life of the rational element' also has two meanings, we must state that life in the sense of activity is what we mean; for this seems to be the more proper sense of the term. Now if the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle, and if we say 'so-and-so-and 'a good so-and-so' have a function which is the same in kind, e.g. a lyre, and a good lyre-player, and so without qualification in all cases, eminence in respect of goodness being added to the name of the function (for the

5. Ethics for Man

The science of ethics answers the question of what values our survival requires. This contrasts with the views she suggested earlier that she thinks characterize the rest of the history of ethics, where it is given by the supernatural, nature, or is simply a matter of whim. It is instead an "objective, metaphysical necessity of man's survival".

> The standard of value of the Objectivist ethics — the standard by which one judges what is good or evil — is *man's life*, or: that which is required for man's survival *qua* man.

Rand believes that, for a rational being to survive, reason needs to be applied to guide our actions appropriately. The two methods of survival are thinking and productive work.

Opposed to this are those who are "mental parasites" who do not think for themselves and "looters" who are not engaging in production, having "dictators" and "criminals" especially in mind.

This is when Rand hits a snag in her argument. She makes this claim:

> Such is the meaning of the definition: that which is required for man's survival *qua* man. It does not mean a *momentary* or a merely *physical* survival. It does not mean the momentary physical survival of a mindless brute, waiting for another brute to crush his skull. It does not mean the momentary physical survival of a crawling aggregate of muscles who is willing to accept any terms, obey any thug and surrender any values, for the sake of what is known as "survival at any price," which may or may not last a week or a year. "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 of existence which are open to his choice.
>
> Man cannot survive as anything but man. He *can* abandon his means of survival, his mind, he *can* turn himself into a subhuman creature and he *can* turn his life into a brief span of agony — just as his body can exist for a while in the process of disintegration by disease. But he *cannot* succeed, as a subhuman, in achieving anything but the subhuman — as the ugly horror of the antirational periods of mankind's history can demonstrate. Man has to be man by choice — and it is the task of ethics to teach him how to live like man.
>
> The Objectivist ethics holds man's life as the *standard* of value — and *his own life* as the ethical *purpose* of every individual man.

I highlight this portion to emphasize that, in this portion of Rand's argument, she clarifies that by 'life' she does *not* mean "merely physical survival." In fact, it is implied there are times when one should prefer death over "survival at any price."

From this, Rand thinks she gets three cardinal values (Reason, Purpose, and Self-Esteem) and three cardinal virtues (Rationality, Productiveness, and Pride).

She then makes this odd claim:

> Productive work is the central *purpose* of a rational man's life, the central value that integrates and determines the hierarchy of all his other values.

We will review what is so odd about this later in our critique.

terizations. But Rand then misunderstood this and confused these points together. This is speculation on my part, but that is my best explanation for how someone could arrive at a position so wrong yet containing elements that are not wrong in themselves.

This "telephone" distortion is even more apparent if we compare and contrast Aristotle's ethics to Rand. While she claimed Aristotle never even attempted to answer the questions she's asking, we've seen that he did in fact ask these questions and attempt to answer them, and Rand's answers are suspiciously similar to his.

Consider Rand's emphasis on needing to find what the "ultimate value" is, and then compare that to what we find in Aristotle:

> If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right? If so, we must try, in outline at least, to determine what it is, and of which of the sciences or capacities it is the object. (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 1, Ch. 2)

Strikingly familiar, isn't it?

Things don't just stop there either. There is a good deal of overlap between the general framework of the argument Rand gives, something she claimed Aristotle never did, and the actual argument we find in Aristotle:

> "Now our treatment of this science will be adequate, if it achieves that amount of precision which belongs to its subject matter. The same exactness must not be expected in all departments of philosophy alike, any more than in all the products of the arts and crafts. The subjects studied by political science are Moral Nobility and Justice; but these conceptions involve much difference of opinion and uncertainty, so that they are sometimes believed to be mere conventions and to have no real existence in the nature of things. And a similar uncertainty surrounds the conception of the Good, because it frequently occurs that good things have harmful consequences: people have before now been ruined by wealth, and in other cases courage has cost men their lives. We must therefore be content if, in dealing with subjects and starting from premises thus uncertain, we succeed in presenting a broad outline of the truth: when our subjects and our premises are merely generalities, it is enough if we arrive at generally valid conclusions. Accordingly we may ask the student also to accept the various views we put forward in the same spirit; for it is the mark of an educated mind to expect that amount of exactness in each kind which the nature of the particular subject admits. It is equally unreasonable to accept merely probable conclusions from a mathematician and to demand strict demonstration from an orator." (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 1, Ch. 3)

The distinct impression I get from this is that Rand heard someone explain Aristotle as believing ethics wasn't exact and that he emphasized empirically learning by studying people considered virtuous, both of which would be accurate charac-

Then she waxes on about how we need to be rational all the time, as a precondition of productive work, and that pride is a result of holding your life as the highest value.

She then tries to apply this to a kind of social ethic. Rand makes this claim:

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

At this point, Rand elaborates on more specific virtues which I will only glean past, since they will not be the primary subject of critique.

Rand then waxes on more about how happiness isn't just about pleasure, but the achievement of your values, and how this cannot be set by irrational whims. Emotional and moral happiness are therefore distinguished.

Rand believes this is the flaw of hedonism since she thinks happiness can be the purpose, but not the standard, of ethics. She characterizes Nietzsche as a hedonist only pursuing one's "selfish" whims, and other utilitarians Bentham, Mill, or Comte for promoting "selfless" hedonism based on the whims of others.

> When a "desire," regardless of its nature or cause, is taken as an ethical primary, and the gratification of any and all desire is taken as an ethical goal (such as "the greatest happiness of the greatest number") — men have no choice but to hate,

> fear and fight one another, because their desires and their interests will necessarily clash.

Rand wants her Objectivism to instead promote "rational selfishness" which, instead of promoting desires, is entirely focused on this objective value. She believes, by this, we also avoid any idea that human values are in conflict with one another. If we do not desire the "unearned," then people relate to one another by trading value for value, shaping Rand's idea of justice.

How does one live as a "trader" and avoid living parasitically? Here Rand introduces her "non-initiation principle," something I critiqued in detail here.

> The basic political principle of the Objectivist ethics is: no man may initiate the use of physical force against others. No man — or group or society or government — has the right to assume the role of a criminal and initiate the use of physical compulsion against any man. Men have the right to use physical force *only* in retaliation and only against those who initiate its use. The ethical principle involved is simple and clear-cut: it is the difference between murder and self-defense.

We also see that Rand, much like Murray Rothbard, believes property rights are necessary for all other rights.

> The only proper, *moral* purpose of a government is to protect man's rights, which means: to protect him from physical violence — to protect his right to his own life, to his own liberty, to his own *property* and to the pursuit of his own happiness. Without property rights, no other rights are possible.

I have to wonder how, if property is necessary for other rights, including liberty, Rand would need to react to my other

> Life of Contemplation. The generality of mankind then show themselves to be utterly slavish, by preferring what is only a life for cattle; but they get a hearing for their view as reasonable because many persons of high position share the feelings of Sardanapalus. Men of refinement, on the other hand, and men of action think that the Good is honor — for this may be said to be the end of the Life of Politics. But honor after all seems too superficial to be the Good for which we are seeking; since it appears to depend on those who confer it more than on him upon whom it is conferred, whereas we instinctively feel that the Good must be something proper to its possessor and not easy to be taken away from him. (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 1, Ch. 5)

Rand is simply lying about Aristotle here, and this is the *most* respectful she treats any philosopher.

We can also see some of the "telephone game" distortion here. Rand claims that Aristotle did not think of ethics as an "exact science." This is true. But Rand equates this with her claim that Aristotle was only considering surface-level observations about what noble and wise people do without questioning why they are noble or wise, which is false.

When Aristotle says that ethics is not an exact science, he does so because he thinks the subject is inherently inexact. Ethics does not have precise mathematical precision. There is not always an exact "right" answer, but could be a range of different right answers. To be a good person for Aristotle is like being a good musician or a good public speaker. There are definitely certain principles in play that can be studied and put into practice, but there are also exceptions or flourishes that allow for deviations.

Ayn Rand and Aristotle

As mentioned above, Aristotle was the only philosopher Ayn Rand admitted to having any intellectual debt to, and even then the only thing she admitted to getting from him was a system of formal logic. He is the philosopher she treats with the most respect, and even then she wants to limit how much she actually credits him.

She says this to emphasize how she believes no one has ever written on metaethics, including the "greatest of all philosophers." Ayn Rand presents her writing as a unique development in philosophic history because she is willing to ask these questions when others are not.

> The greatest of all philosophers, Aristotle, did not regard ethics as an exact science; he based his ethical system on observations of what the noble and wise men of his time chose to do, leaving unanswered the questions of: *why* they chose to do it and *why* he evaluated them as noble and wise.

But this is all absurd. Aristotle very explicitly considered questions about what makes people noble and wise. It is the major topic of the first book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. For example, here we can see Aristotle specifically contemplating what makes a life good according to different popular answers and seeing what makes the most sense:

> To judge from men's lives, the more or less reasoned conceptions of the Good or Happiness that seem to prevail are the following. On the one hand the generality of men and the most vulgar identify the Good with pleasure, and accordingly are content with the Life of Enjoyment — for there are three specially prominent Lives, the one just mentioned, the Life of Politics, and the

people on how Property is Despotism. In my example, property very clearly is a *hindrance* to the liberty of the entire population of Ruritania except King Charlie.

That's a point for later though. Rand cuts off her discussion here, not wanting to get into the full political theory of Objectivism. I will cut things off here as well. She does go on for a bit more, trying to contrast her view to 'subjectivist' ones advocating 'altruism,' but the most important points of her argument and the groundwork she gives for them have been covered.

In Review

Rand first asserts the failure of what she sees as pervasive ethical views and the history of ethical philosophy, claiming they failed to properly ground why we need ethics.

She then asserts that ethics must begin with the study of value, something she asserts is only relevant for living beings since they uniquely face an alternative of existence or non-existence. This, and not consciousness, is the relevant point needed for having life, which she reinforces by claiming that an amoeba can have values but an indestructible robot cannot.

She then argues that our own lives are therefore the only thing we can truly value. Everything else is only valued as a means to the end of the ultimate value of our own continued survival. Their value is purely derivative of the life of the organism, of their continued survival.

Since different species of life have different needs, the nature of each organism also dictates what these lesser values are.

Humans are the highest form of life and, lacking the 'automatic' functions found in lesser animals since we have reason, must actively choose life. Reason therefore is valued only as man's means of survival.

From this, Rand provides a list of values and associated virtues that follow from this. These virtues are so important

for living as "man *qua* man" that we should be willing to die rather than violate them. She therefore rejects any ethical theory that suggests "survival at any price."

We can now move on to the critique of Rand's argument.

I will set aside her generalization about the general history and state of ethical philosophy and focus on the "objective" account Rand thinks she has given. Once we highlight just how poor her argument really is, we can more clearly see why her dismissiveness and arrogance are irrational and unearned.

Let's start with the obvious.

A Critique of "The Objectivist Ethics"

1. Life isn't even Rand's ultimate value

The most glaring issue with this argument is how the start of Rand's argument contradicts her conclusion.

Rand's entire claim to objectivity, to establishing ethics as a science, is that she is deriving her idea of value directly from the nature of living things. She boasts that she has solved Hume's "Is-Ought" problem this way.

And what is the ultimate value Rand derives from living things? Life itself, in the sense of its literal continued survival.

> What standard determines what is *proper* in this context? The standard is the organism's life, or: that which is required for the organism's survival.

That Rand means literal physical survival is further emphasized by her own examples. While a human and an amoeba are very different living organisms, Rand believes they share the *same* ultimate value: Life. They only differ in their *lesser* values being derived from this ultimate value because of their different natures (e.g. a human's continued survival requires different kinds of food than what is required for an amoeba).

tive ethics. She is claiming that they didn't even care to try! She's not saying that most people's metaethics is wrong. She is denying that, before herself, any metaethical questions have even been asked, save perhaps the rare exception.

> Most philosophers took the existence of ethics took the existence of ethics for granted, as a given, as a historical fact, and were not concerned with discovering its metaphysical cause or objective validation.

Who are these philosophers who believe that ethics is the province of whims? Rand does not name names. Moreover, anyone familiar with the history of ethics will tell you that things have generally been the exact opposite, with reason elevated over emotions. Figures like Hume or Nietzsche were seen as great challengers to ethical philosophy because they denied that ethics had this kind of rational or universal basis. Rand has things completely backward.

When Rand does finally get around to naming philosophers, her descriptions are always rather odd in a way that is hard to describe. There are some accurate points frequently mixed in, but which get presented by her in such a strange way that they seem to be making a dramatically different point from what they intended, or sometimes read them as saying the exact *opposite* of what they meant. It is as if Rand learned philosophy through the game of telephone, with someone starting with accurate information, but somehow as it got from them to her it got distorted each step of the way until she thinks they are saying something completely different. We can see this even with philosophers (or rather the singular philosopher) who she has a favorable view of: Aristotle.

> tions — or is it the province of *reason*? Is ethics a subjective luxury — or an *objective* necessity?
>
> In the sorry record of the history of mankind's ethics — with a rare few, and unsuccessful, exceptions — moralists have regarded ethics as the province of whims, that is: of the irrational. Some of them did so explicitly, by intention — others implicitly, by default. A "whim" is a desire experienced by a person who does not know and does not care to discover its cause.
>
> No philosopher has given a rational, objectively demonstrable, scientific answer to the question of *why* man needs a code of values. So long as that question remains unanswered, no rational, scientific, *objective* code of ethics could be discovered or defined.

As Rand tells it, before she came along in the mid-20th century no one had ever tried to do metaethics, i.e. the branch of philosophy which tries to "understand the metaphysical, epistemological, semantic, and psychological, presuppositions and commitments of moral thought, talk, and practice."[8] Instead, before her, the only attempts at ethics broke down to, either explicitly or implicitly, appealing to 'whims,' by which she means desires we do not even attempt to understand.

In reality, these are some of the most basic questions that any freshman will be asked in even the most introductory class on ethics. To demonstrate just how long people have been asking this exact question, we can go all the way back to Plato's dialogues and figures like Callicles in *Gorgias* or Glaucon in the *Republic* arguing that justice is merely a matter of custom, with nature while Socrates argues against in favor of a rational morality.

It is important to note that Rand is not merely claiming that philosophers have *failed* to establish any kind of objec-

When Rand talks about values for "man *qua* man," this is what she means, or at least it is what she *should* mean given her preceding argument. Reason has merely *instrumental* value because humans need it to survive.

But this hits an obvious issue when later Rand tries to describe her idea of human ethics. Here "man *qua* man" takes on a distinct meaning which is more along the lines of "the kind of life a man *should* live." Rand has in mind not merely a *long* life, but a kind of honorable, noble, or magnanimous life that a rational being should aspire to, and is very dismissive of 'parasitic' or 'subhuman' life or people who care only about their own physical survival.

At the start of her argument, whenever Rand referred to 'life,' she was referring to physical survival. But at the end of her argument, 'life' has taken on this different kind of meaning of "the good life" or "life as a rational being," distinct from mere physical survival or the life of the "subhuman" or parasitic. She rejects the idea of "survival at any price."

So we have arrived at a contradiction. Do we value reason because it is our "means of survival"? Or do we value life because it allows us to live specifically as "rational beings"? In other words, is mere physical survival in whatever form it happens to take our ultimate value, or is it a specific kind of life? Which one has merely instrumental value?

If survival is the ultimate value, then "survival at any price" is the correct answer. We, of course, always try to reduce any price we must pay for a minimum, but if physical survival is the ultimate value then no price could ever be so steep that we shouldn't be willing to pay it. Otherwise, that would mean something has a greater value than the ultimate value, which would be a contradiction in terms.

Now the Objectivist may object here that this is a misrepresentation. Whenever Rand speaks dismissively of looters or parasites, she does so while also emphasizing how it only allows for *momentary* survival. The life of the "subhuman" is not

bad because it is violent and brutish *per se*, but because it is short. Any time you are not using your reason, your means of survival, you are always putting yourself at a greater risk of not surviving as long as you otherwise would. In other words, Rand ultimately does value physical survival as the ultimate value, and any praise she gives to the rational lifestyle over other forms of life is simply because she considers it to always be the best guarantee of physical survival.

However, we know for a fact that Rand did not hold this view. If physical survival were the ultimate value, then obviously there could never be anything worth dying for. If there were, then physical survival is not the ultimate value. But this is exactly what we see. Rand believes there are occasions where it would be entirely rational to sacrifice one's life for the sake of someone sufficiently important to you, as the loss of that person might make that life not worth living.

> The proper method of judging when or whether one should help another person is by reference to one's own rational self-interest and one's own hierarchy of values: the time, money or effort one gives or the risk one takes should be proportionate to the value of the person in relation to one's own happiness.
>
> […]
>
> If the person to be saved is not a stranger, then the risk one should be willing to take is greater in proportion to the greatness of that person's value to oneself. If it is the man or woman one loves, then one can be willing to give one's own life to save him or her—for the selfish reason that life without the loved person could be unbearable. (Ayn Rand, "The Ethics of Emergencies")

Ayn Rand and the Dunning-Kruger Effect, or "I bet no one has ever tried applying reason to ethics before me"

Rand's General Ethical Narrative

Ayn Rand's "Objectivist Ethics" is merely presenting a particularly extreme and simplistic version of natural rights theory, one of the most prominent ethical viewpoints since John Locke in the 1600s, but which she wants to put a modern twist on due to her influence from reading Nietzsche, and borrowing more than a little of her initial structure from Aristotle. While she wants to act like this is unexplored territory in philosophy, it is actually one of the most intensely investigated subjects in the discipline and has been so for thousands of years. Her first steps into this field shows her stumbling, making some basic mistakes, only to then claim to have conquered the entire area. She is only able to maintain this impression because she presents an extremely surface-level and heavily caricatured presentation of all the work that has been done before her while giving minimal credit to her sources. Her general ignorance of the discipline is the only thing that lets her maintain this high level of confidence. It's essentially the Dunning-Kruger effect for ethics.

To show this, let's begin with Rand's initial questions about ethics. How she presents these questions shows essentially the two main alternative views she thinks can be taken, and shows pretty clear favoritism to which answer she thinks sounds better.

> Does an arbitrary human convention, a mere custom, decree that man must guide his actions by a set of principles — or is there a fact of reality that demands it? Is ethics the province of *whims*: of personal emotions, social edicts and mystical revela-

that the robot has values in the same way I wouldn't say the amoeba does either.

So just from the very start of Rand's argument we find a ton of not only mistakes, but sloppy ones too. Rand's argument, even if successful, would not lead to her idea of "man as a heroic being," but as someone who should pursue "survival at any price." She was led into error here because she confused 'life' in the sense of survival with 'life' as 'the kind of life I think humans should live.' This confusion is highlighted by how she presents man as the "highest living species on earth," not because of biological longevity, but because of our capacity for knowledge. She does not merely care about the quantitative length of a life, but the quality of that life as well, meaning certain things are being held as greater values than an organism's survival. Beyond that, she makes a number of other bizarre claims, such as saying life is the only contingent form of being, or how she distinguishes something as 'goal-oriented' vs being 'purposive,' allowing her to claim even non-conscious life has values. Her focus on life as fundamentally about self-preservation is unjustified and evolutionarily incorrect, and for this reason all the logical steps she tries to make toward egoism are unjustified. Any of these issues could have been easily highlighted had Rand submitted her work for peer review, but her pride wouldn't allow it.

Seeing all these issues, we can also now recognize the dismissiveness, contempt, and arrogance Rand held against ethical philosophy was completely unearned. She is not providing her readers with a well-informed or thoughtful critique of ethics. Instead, she is painting a narrative to make herself seem more inventive, acting as a brave iconoclast, instead of just being someone telling the already rich what they want to hear, praising their worst qualities of selfishness and greed with some pseudo-intellectual flourish and providing them with thought-terminating cliches and phrases.

No matter how 'selfish' the justification is for sacrificing your own life to save someone else, you are still choosing to end your own life. You are holding something to be of greater value than your own physical survival.

(I would also object that, when I imagine someone heroically giving up their life for the sake of a loved one, they tend to have in mind how much they value the other person, not how they'd be depressed and might die by suicide afterward. I don't believe Rand would disagree with me there.)

Or consider John Galt, the hero of Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* who can reasonably assume is always acting in a way Rand approved of. Even in "The Objectivist Ethic" Rand treats Galt like a real person and quotes him as Objectivism's "best representative." In the climactic finish (spoilers!), all the incompetent politicians and businessmen have kidnapped John Galt. John had organized a general strike, but being a good Objectivist, it was a strike by all the capitalists and scientists, the real brains behind the world. They are the titular Atlas who held up the sky on his shoulders, but who has now shrugged off this burden. Without them ordering the parasitic workers around and making futuristic sci-fi devices, the US economy has collapsed because of general incompetence (and also a lot of these Objectivist strikers burning their businesses down as they left). By the end of the novel, all the politicians and remaining corrupt capitalists that believe in altruism and social responsibility, now recognizing their need for John Galt, want to make him into a dictator over the economy because he's so smart and cool when none of them know how to do anything. But as a good Objectivist, he rejects dictatorship in favor of laissez-faire capitalism, which they cannot accept, so they decide to torture him to force him to become dictator. At one point the torture machine they're using on him breaks and, because they are so incompetent, they can't even fix it to torture him again. John, still strapped to the device, actually tells them step-by-step instructions on how to fix it. Directly confronted with how

pathetic they are, one of the torturers (the brother of the main character) is stupefied and enraged. He tries to kill John and is only held back by the other torturers who still realize how much they need him to become dictator.

(Yes, this is the real plot of *Atlas Shrugged*.)

I submit to you that letting himself be tortured and telling them how to fix his torture machine was not, in fact, the most rational choice John Galt could have made to maintain his own physical survival. It might have been a very noble thing if he were a man of principle, moved by his devotion to truth and justice that he would rather die than even feign giving them up what he believes in the face of torture and death. It can be a real badass act of defiance, proving you're better than your torturers. But they are not the actions of a man who is using his reason to determine the best course of action to guarantee his continued survival. It demonstrably put his life at greater risk.

Even if we did want to say this was part of some masterstroke on Galt's part to break his enemies, knowing they wouldn't go through with it (quite the risk!), he elsewhere also threatens to kill himself before seeing the main character be tortured instead.

> "I don't have to tell you," he said, "that if I do it, it won't be an act of self-sacrifice. I do not care to live on their terms, I do not care to obey them and I do not care to see you enduring a drawn-out murder."

With all this, we can definitively say that, in Rand's estimation, some kinds of life are not worth living. It is possible, in her view, to hold something in such high value that we can reasonably be willing to die for it, or that your life can become so miserable that you find death preferable.

These positions are entirely incompatible with the view that life, an organism's survival, is the ultimate value. No loss of a

When you imagine Superman, do you see him as an entity who "would not be able to have any values" because of his invulnerability? Assuming there isn't anything like kryptonite or villains like Doomsday around that can kill Superman around, do you picture him as incapable of valuing anything? Or do you think of him fighting for truth and justice, i.e. acting to gain and/or keep values?

This isn't to say that I can't also think of an immortal and invulnerable being who would be perpetually disinterested. I've read Watchmen, I've seen Doctor Manhattan. But there is no obvious or inherent mental connection with something being immortal and not being incapable of valuing anything.

This is even true if we try to move further away from biology and think of something like, say, the villainous android Brainiac! He is a robot who, despite being effectively indestructible (whenever his physical body is destroyed, it simply downloads into his near-infinite supply of other bodies) looks to exclusively monopolize all the knowledge of the known universe and famously shrinks cities and keeps them in little glass jars.

To my knowledge, such a character has not inspired widespread confusion among DC Comic readers about how an immortal and destructible being can still act to gain and/or keep things. There is no contradiction in something immortal and indestructible valuing other things precisely because we do not value things only with respect to whether they help to guarantee our survival or not.

Maybe Rand wasn't imagining the robot was conscious though. In that case, I would agree that it seems intuitively plausible that the robot could not value anything. But that would be precisely because it is non-conscious, not that it is immortal or indestructible. Even with the most charitable readings of Rand possible that I've tried to provide, it still seems obvious that, if something values something else, there is a consciousness doing that evaluation. I would not say

> To make this point fully clear, try to imagine an immortal, indestructible robot, an entity which moves and acts, but which cannot be affected by anything, which cannot be changed in any respect, which cannot be damaged, injured, or destroyed. Such an entity would not be able to have any values; it would have nothing to gain or to lose; it could not regard anything as *for* or *against* it, as serving or threatening its welfare, as fulfilling or frustrating its interests. It could have no interests and no goals.

It truly astounds me that Rand believed this helped to *support* her argument rather than directly *debunk* it.

Her reasoning seems to have been, as I've explained above, that only something which faces the alternative of existence or non-existence can be a value, and that life is the only thing that may exist or not exist. She then, without support, concluded that only our *own* life can be of ultimate value to us, and that all other things can only have value indirectly based on whether they can be used to support that organism's individual survival.

To highlight this, she is trying to have us imagine an immortal robot. Because its continued existence is guaranteed, she found it intuitively obvious that it *couldn't* value anything else. This is because she believed that life, an organism's own survival, is the only thing that can be valued in itself, and that everything else could only have derivative value if it is needed to support its survival (i.e. as 'fuel').

But let's ask a crucial question: Is this robot conscious? If it is, then it's not clear to me why Rand made it a robot. Because she can more easily imagine a robot being invulnerable perhaps? So long as we're using our imagination, we might as well think of an immortal and invulnerable person then, like Superman.

lesser and derivative value could be so great that it justifies the destruction of a greater value, and an ultimate value is greater than all others by definition.

This is the most obvious contradiction in Rand's argument laid bare. On the one hand, she wants to present "man as a heroic being." But heroism typically involves believing in certain principles and values so strongly you're willing to put your life on the line for them. Rand is no exception here. But the foundation of Rand's ethical system, without her realizing it, actually precludes heroism entirely.

Rand is pulling a sleigh-of-hand trick here. She begins by trying to demonstrate that 'life' is the ultimate value, where life is understood as an "organism's survival," and everything "proper" for that kind of organism to this goal is determined by its nature. But she is ending with something entirely different. Human life now means something more along the lines of "the kind of life proper to a rational being," but where what is "proper" is now much more nebulously defined instead of being directed to physical survival. It is only because of this redefinition that Rand has introduced the possibility that some form of life might be so unfit for a rational being that they should, or at least reasonably could, prefer death.

You can actually see this trick can even be seen in the structure of her argument. Rand asserts, without argument, that "man" is the "highest living species on earth." By what standard is Rand judging man to be the highest living species? Presumably, it is by the only standard she introduces in her essay: life. If Rand were using the first sense of life, the highest living species should be the one with the longest individual lives. That is the natural conclusion if we take her argument seriously. Instead of man being the highest living species on earth, that title now goes to the Antarctic glass sponges, which are estimated to live for 15,000 years.

Every step Rand takes to make mankind seem superior actually only makes it seem inferior. All other species, we are told,

can survive through automatic and innate processes. The steps toward conscious life, and then to rational life, are presented by Rand as steps where we *lose* what everything else has automatically. "Man has no automatic code of survival." While Rand points out that man has a "limitless capacity for gaining knowledge," Rand has not given us any reason to think this knowledge is valuable. In fact, she's given us every reason to think we've been left with a bad deal.

Life, and only life, is the ultimate value for Rand. Everything else only has derivative value, being judged according to whether it promotes or detracts from our physical survival. "An organism's life is its *standard of value*: that which furthers its life is the *good*, that which threatens it is the *evil*."

Certainly we humans need knowledge to survive, but we only need that because we lack this automatic and innate code of values. "Wretched humanity, the lowest living species on earth! Wallowing in poverty, it must scrounge around for its own code of values, leading it to frequent error, while all other species have this innately! All hail the sponge!"

I would say that Rand lacked the courage to hold to such logical consistency, but the truth is she didn't even understand what she was saying in the first place, never realizing there was such an error in her own work. She instead took it as obvious that mankind's greater capacity for knowledge, our reason, was distinguishing us from other species in some noble way (but without any *noblesse oblige*, given her entirely predictable attitude toward environmental conservation efforts).

Rand did not actually hold life as the ultimate value. She instead had a certain vision of what type of person she admired and wanted a way to systematize her view.

Here is my best guess on how her thought process went: Rand was a big fan of Nietzsche and found in his work the idea of a superman who substitutes his own aristocratic values against modern largely Christian morality, emphasizing a warrior spirit and artistic brilliance, which Nietzsche would of-

However, even if we value our own lives 'automatically' because they are self-sustaining processes, this would not make life the *ultimate* value since, as we can see, we can come to value other things over and above our own self-preservation.

But an even bigger problem for Rand's argument is that life is not merely a process of *self*-preservation, but of *species*-preservation. Evolutionarily speaking, those are actually the more important traits. Natural selection does not *per se* favor traits just for our own individual longevity, but those traits which give reproductive advantages. This sometimes even means selecting for traits that go *against* self-preservation, like with the sting of a honey bee.

If we understand the ultimate value by looking at living organisms as goal-oriented beings, then life is obviously being directed toward reproduction, toward the life of the species, not the life of the individual. This is entirely anathema to Ayn Rand's egoism.

Ironically, Rand's salvation here would be to flee *back* to the Is-Ought Problem, pointing to the naturalistic fallacy that just because life is directed towards the good of the species does not imply she needs to uphold that as the ultimate value herself. Just because we evolved to take care of the entire human race doesn't mean I am ethically obliged to do so!' But she would, however, in the process be abandoning her entire argument as nonsense.

4. Values and Immortality

Rand believed that the core of her argument, the one she was proud enough to quote directly from John Galt's speech in *Atlas Shrugged*, is made clear and obvious by her indestructible robot thought experiment. I quote it once again here for reference:

argue that only your own life can be a value. She only argues that only something contingent can be a value, and that life is the only continent thing, and therefore concludes that only your own life is a value to you. But why not any other lives? They are just as contingent as my own.

Rand never tells us, but we might guess at some of the ways she might try to justify it.

The first argument could be that values, as she defines them, are always agent-relative. They are something that one acts to gain and/or keep. Divorced from a 'one' acting (even if this 'one' is a non-conscious amoeba), value is incoherent. So maybe, since value is agent-relative, this implies that your own life is always a value to you. But your own life being a value to you doesn't preclude other lives from being valuable to you as well. I could value my own life and the lives of others.

There is maybe a bit of slippery wordplay going on here. Rand may argue that "Any value must be a value to someone. If you're going to argue that x, y, or z are values, then you must explain why they are values *to you.* But you are your life, so your life is the ultimate value."

This mixes up life in the sense of your identity with life as your continued survival. This confusion is easily exposed when we consider real examples of someone valuing someone else's life. We saw that even John Galt, Rand's paragon of Objectivism, valued the lives of some other people so much that he was willing to die to save them. He argues this is a selfish act, since he is the one that values them, but that only highlights that there is a difference between something being a value you hold and valuing your own continued survival.

The second argument Rand could make, which would be a bit better, would be to say that life is, as she defined it, a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action. Since it is 'self-sustaining,' all living organisms value their own lives by definition, but the same could not be said of the lives of others.

ten describe as life-affirming. Rand then took this literally and tried to combine it with the kind of broad framing Aristotle gives for the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics.* There she found Aristotle pointing to reason as the distinguishing feature of mankind, from which he developed an elaborate theory of virtues. Rand thought she could put her own twist on this by trying to fit this idea of life-affirmation into Aristotle's own argument, but did not understand either argument to do so elegantly, ultimately leading to this central contradiction in her work.

This is a guess, but it is a well-informed guess.

Rand once said "Contradictions do not exist. Whenever you think that you are facing a contradiction, check your premises. You will find that one of them is wrong." We have found her contradiction. She invites us to find what is wrong with her premises. Let's see what issues exist with her idea of value.

2. Value, Existence, and Non-Existence

Rand declared that ethics is an investigation into values, namely what they are and where they come from. Rand defined a value as "that which one acts to gain and/or keep." From this she concluded that a value must be something contingent, i.e. something which may or may not exist. She then claimed that life is the only thing that may or may not exist, being either living or dead, and therefore is the only thing anyone could possibly value. All other things can only be valued indirectly with reference to life, benefiting or harming it.

This argument is so ridiculous that I'm finding it hard to pick a good starting point.

Let's start with maybe the most ridiculous claim: that 'existence or nonexistence' only pertains to living organisms.

> I quote from Galt's speech: "There is only one fundamental alternative in the universe: existence or

> nonexistence — and it pertains to a single class of entities: to living organisms. The existence of inanimate matter is unconditional, the existence of life is not: it depends on a specific course of action. Matter is indestructible, it changes its forms, but it cannot cease to exist. It is only a living organism that faces a constant alternative: the issue of life or death."

Today I had a bowl of soup for lunch. The bowl of soup existed. I ate the soup. Now the bowl of soup no longer exists. I look at the bowl which once contained soup and find it empty. The fundamental alternative in the universe of existence or nonexistence therefore applies, at minimum, to both living organisms and bowls of soup.

But isn't it true that the matter that made up that bowl of soup still exists, now having only changed its form into a partially digested state? True enough! But this is also true of life, which is also just another form of matter. When a living being dies, its remains remain. Nothing about it passing into and out of existence privileges life over any other form of matter as a bowl of soup, a chair, a cloud, a flame, a rock, or whatever else.[6]

Might anything else distinguish living organisms from other forms of matter? Let's consider Rand's description of life as "a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action." Does anything here make life unique?

No. A wildfire is also a process which, through its self-generated actions, spreads out to nearby sources of fuel, allowing it to sustain itself. This can become such a big issue that massive teams of firefighters are required to halt this process and cut the fire off from fuel sources. If we prefer an even more dramatic example that is self-contained, we could also look at the Sun.[7] It maintains its own existence in a process of nuclear fusion and will live for billions of years.

We might object here that fire isn't doing any of this on purpose. What a fire does automatically, a living being can do consciously, with a purpose in mind. But Rand was very explicit that she was including *all* life in her analysis, including non-conscious life! Even an amoeba, she claims, values things because its nutritive function maintains its life.

Rand tries to mark a distinction here by claiming that all life is 'goal-directed,' even if it is not 'purposive,' which requires consciousness. She weakens even this claim by saying she is not asserting there exists any "teleological principle operating in insentient nature." Rather, she just means that "the automatic functions" of a thing "are actions whose nature is such that they result in the preservation" of that thing. But we saw that the same thing was true of a wildfire. Its automatic functions are actions which result in its preservation.

It is true that the amoeba, even if it is not conscious, needs its proper 'fuel' or it will die, going out of existence But the same is true of actual fire, which will go out unless it gets literal fuel.

From this we can conclude that, according to Rand's own argument, it is *not* only living organisms that have values. Taking her seriously, it would be true, at minimum, of all self-sustaining processes, including inorganic ones, and possibly all contingent existences whatsoever.

3. Valuing Life vs Valuing Your *Own* Life

So any contingent existence may have values according to the conditions which make it contingent. So what? I am still a human being, and my contingent existence is as a living organism. If we can accept that something can be a value to an amoeba, then it doesn't seem like any great challenge to say something might also be a value to fire.

This brings us to the next important point. Even if we accept that only 'life' could be a value, Rand never even *attempts* to