

Is Benevolent Egoism Coherent?

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.² 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.³

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.

1. The Principle of Ethical Egoism

P1 is an application of a more fundamental principle apparently endorsed by Rand, ethical egoism. Ethical egoism is usually defined, roughly, as the doctrine that each person should always do whatever best promotes his own interests.⁴ 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 sort of reasons one can have for acting in a particular way.⁵

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.⁶

P1 is an application of EE: by definition, sacrificing myself for the benefit of others would not serve my own interests,⁷ 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.

2. 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 first 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!”⁸ 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 can not, 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 furthers A’s).⁹ 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 which 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 value¹⁰—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 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.¹¹

But just as Moore emphatically asserted that value was absolute, Rand emphatically asserted that it was relative.¹² 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 a single sense of ‘good’ involved there, 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 his own conception of value, so we seem to be at an impasse so far. We will return to this issue later, however.

3. 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.

What, then, does Rand say in defense of P2? Three things:

(1)

First: 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.”¹³ 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*.”¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵ 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 another¹⁶) 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.

Given this, 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.¹⁷

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 below, 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹

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. Remembering 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.²² 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?²³

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 incompatible 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 judgement.²⁴

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?²⁵ Conspicuous in Rand's remarks about rights is the absence, in her discussions of what rights one has and of the importance of rights, of any appeal to EE²⁶: she says people have rights because they must be free to act on their own judgement if they are to live; she does not say that people have rights because I must let them act on their own judgement 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.²⁷ But we have already seen the pitfalls for Rand involved 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.”²⁸ 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.

Having rejected all three of Rand’s 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.

4. 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 non-academic 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. 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.”²⁹ 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,³⁰ 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.*³¹

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 . . .

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.³²

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.³³

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.³⁴

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.³⁵

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.³⁶

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.³⁷ 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 does not depend upon others for his sense of self-esteem, nor does he rest his values and other philosophical beliefs on

conformity with the beliefs of others.³⁸

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 as discussed in section 2 above goes by the wayside, if Rand was not in fact defending EE.

There remain two 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, given that 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 the 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*" and "the good is an aspect of reality in relation to man"?³⁹ 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 which 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 that inference is the major basis for relativism in philosophy).

Now, the important point is this. 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 either of which 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”⁴⁰: 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.⁴¹ 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.”⁴² 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.⁴³

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.⁴⁴

5. Conclusion

The answer to the title question of this essay depends upon the meaning of “egoism.” Given

the received interpretation of the word (given 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 G. E. 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 section 4, a coherent doctrine can be constructed. In this interpretation, the '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 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 which initially seem to support an agent-relative conception of value can plausibly be interpreted otherwise. There remains the unfortunate possibility that there is no fact of the matter as to which interpretation of Rand is correct, for the reason 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 appreciate⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶

Notes

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1. The subtitle on the title page of VOS.

2. *VOS*, vii.

3. See note 21 below. The principles are supposed to apply to all rational beings, i.e., the theory is that no rational being should sacrifice himself for the benefit of others, etc.

4. See for example, Peikoff, *OPAR*, 230; Rachels, 66.

5. Hunt, 74.

6. This is to be taken to imply that ‘that it would serve my own interests’ *is* a reason for doing something (provided it is true that the thing would serve my interests). See *VOS*, 25, 27.

7. This seems to be true by virtue of the meaning of “sacrifice.” Rand, however, gives an even quicker argument against ‘sacrificing’ in general (*VOS*, 44): she seems to think that it means giving up a greater value to obtain a lesser. 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) winding up, oneself, worse off.

8. Moore, section 59; emphasis Moore’s.

9. Lester Hunt has challenged this inference, arguing that the good of some others might, consistent with egoism, partly *constitute* my own good, rather than merely being a means to it (81-2). 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) I cannot give Hunt’s theory a full discussion here, but a few brief remarks are in order.

First, the last quotation above seems to use “good” in an absolute, rather than an agent-relative sense (see below in the text for discussion); otherwise the inference is invalid. To illustrate, consider the case of a jailer and his prisoner. One day, the jail burns down, allowing the prisoner to escape. This is an event both in the jailer’s life and in the prisoner’s life. But from the fact that it is a good (for the prisoner) event in the prisoner’s life, it does not follow that it is a good (for the jailer) event in the jailer’s life.

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 an event belonging both to my life and to my friend’s, indicating that, in his view, the entire process, including the movements of both my and my friend’s bodies, possibly including the thoughts that went along with those movements in both our minds—not just the movements and thoughts carried out by me—was 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.

Lastly, note that the contradiction in egoism allegedly results as long as there is any person whose life the egoist fails to treat as an end in itself while the egoist holds that that person should regard his own life as an end in itself. Thus, the problem will not be removed even if Hunt succeeds in showing that an egoist can treat *some* lives as ends in themselves.

10. Smith, 97-9.

11. Moore, 99.

12. See the text to note 39 below; however, see also the discussion in section 4 regarding whether Rand actually held an agent-relative theory of value.

13. *VOS*, 31; second emphasis added.

14. *Lexicon*, 215; emphasis added.

15. *Lexicon*, 211; italics Rand's.

16. *Lexicon*, 215; *VOS*, 32; *Atlas Shrugged*, 949.

17. *VOS*, 24.

18. Contrast *VOS*, 93-4, where Rand opines that rights are necessary for human survival; and *VOS*, 23: "Such looters are parasites incapable of survival, who exist by destroying those who *are* capable. . . ."

19. 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.)

20. Rand claims that it is impossible for irrational people to be happy (*VOS*, 28-9), but note that this would require independent evidence. The following circular argument is to be avoided, at any rate: The leftist politicians can't be happy, because their actions are irrational; their actions are irrational, because they go against their (the agents') own interests; the actions are against their interests, because they prevent them (the agents) from being happy.

21. *VOS*, 27.

22. 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, 47) Nozick (30-3) argues persuasively that this principle leads to

respect for individual rights. However, see the qualification in note 27 below.

23. This problem is briefly discussed in King (119-20).

24. *Lexicon*, 213-14; *VOS*, 93-4.

25. See Mack (152ff.) for further discussion of this problem.

26. See *Lexicon*, 212-17.

27. 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.

28. *Lexicon*, 217. See also the text to note 14.

29. *VOS*, vii.

30. By a “true egoist,” of course, I mean someone who subscribes to EE as I have stated it above.

31. *VOS*, 27; emphasis Rand’s.

32. *VOS*, 49; I have altered the placement of italics to emphasize my point.

33. *VOS*, 45.

34. *Lexicon*, 449.

35. *Lexicon*, 449-50.

36. *Lexicon*, 450; emphasis Rand’s.

37. See *VOS*, 31; *CUI*, 19; contrast *VOS*, 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.

38. *Atlas Shrugged*, 943, 945.

39. *VOS*, 15; *CUI*, 14.

40. *VOS*, 15.

41. *VOS*, 24. Rand frequently criticizes people for pursuing what isn't good.

42. *CUI*, 14; emphasis Rand's.

43. *VOS*, 44.

44. 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.

45. Barring, perhaps, those individuals with a strong interest in defining official Objectivist doctrine. See Peikoff, *OPAR*, xiv-xv; cf. the concluding paragraphs of "Fact and Value."

46. I would like to thank Bryan Caplan and an anonymous referee at the *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* for their comments on the manuscript.