

COMMENTS ON HEATHER DEMAREST'S "TELEOLOGY AND RAND'S METAETHICS: HOW FUNCTION AND PURPOSE SAVE US FROM OUR GENES"

COMMENTS – MICHAEL YOUNG (6/30/2004; REVISED 7/11/2004)

p. 1 – Small point. Doesn't the Is-Ought Problem concern *justifying* ought-statements on the basis of is-statements – not *explaining* the former kind of fact by reference to the latter? Isn't the problem HD is addressing here simply the problem of explaining just what values are (and perhaps how they could fit into the natural, scientific order)? (I take Rand's answer to this sort of explanatory question to be that value-facts for human agents – i.e. value-facts that are action-guiding for an agent with free will – are identical to the non-value-facts of furthering the agent's biological existence relative to the agent's choosing to live.)

p. 2 ff. – Point of clarification. How can FUNCTION be broader than TELEOLOGY if functions are precisely the characteristic actions of teleological entities, as you state in your initial characterization of what a function is? I take it you mean to say that some things have functions, but not all of these things are teleological entities. And I take it that artifacts, which have functions, exhaust this category of things which have functions but which are not teleological entities. Is this right? It would be good to be a bit clearer about how these categories relate to one another, especially in light of the fact that artifact-function apparently exists only relative to the *purposive goals* of the maker or user of the artifact, whereas I take it you are prepared, with Mack, to analyze FUNCTION simply in terms of NEED.

p. 7 – Note that knowing the function of *valuing* may tell us little or nothing about *what we should value* – yet you need the function of valuing to do such work for you. You need to be able to say: in order for valuing to perform its function, we must value certain things and not others. There is a more straight-forward approach, though, that should be kept in mind: we ought to value that which is valuable. I think any correct account will have to take both dimensions into account: the first-order question of what to value and the second-order question of the value of the process of valuing things or having values. (Rand's view does this. Once we choose to live, we ought to recognize what is required to live and value and pursue it. The goal of living determines the content of what we ought to value, at a certain general level of specificity. But I take Rand to allow that part of the value of

valuing is having more specific values the specific content of which is not dictated by the requirements of remaining alive. I think this is part of what Rand is getting at by making *purpose* a cardinal value – though Rand is not explicit about just what causal or causal-constitutive role having purposes has in remaining alive.)

p. 8 – I don't see that you meet this woman's objection. For she is concerned about *her own continued existence*, not passing on her genes or the continued existence of creatures of the *type* that have her genes. She owes her *existence* to others with her genes having the ability to reproduce, but not her *continued existence* to these others. And the continued existence of the species or of one's genes is irrelevant to *one's own* continued existence. Why should causal history have anything to do with the goal-directedness or non-goal-directedness of a system?

This suggests that Binswanger's account of goal-orientation is not what Rand had in mind for the kind of goal-directed activity that grounds action-guiding value for a volitional agent. It seems to me that what she was concerned with was precisely the particular, token existence you find yourself with and the particular, token alternative of life or death that you face. The money quote from Rand (VOS, p. 16, footnote): "I use the term 'goal-directed' ... 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." If this is right, then Rand was not concerned with biological value in the sense that a biologist might be, but rather with the very nature of the vital process itself, without which there could be no evolution. (Note that Rand, in her writings, is officially neutral about the truth of theory of evolution.) The intrinsic nature of particular living entities is the individualist-egoist egg for Rand; passing on genes is the collectivist-altruist chicken. (I have not read Binswanger's book. I gather that he would counter that there are all sorts of self-sustaining systems that would have to be counted as goal-directed on my view. Perhaps. But I doubt that we would not be able to distinguish, solely in terms of their intrinsic features, the "goal-directedness" of, say, solar systems, from the "goal-directedness" inherent in a living entity.)

On this sort of view, there is no need to "save us from our genes." And the sort of causal-explanatory relationships that Binswanger takes to be so important are not. Those relationships concern the continued existence of

types, species, gene-types, not the continued existence of individual organisms.

(Side note. On my “particularist” interpretation of Rand, it seems plausible that characteristic functioning or even flourishing – characteristic functioning which is robust in the sense that it makes likely continued characteristic functioning – rather than simply the continuation of physical existence, is what organisms intrinsically aim at. After all, the particular, intrinsic state of affairs preserved by the self-generated, self-maintaining action is the organism *as it is functionally organized*. Mere physical survival, existence or nonexistence, would not seem to enter the picture at the level of particulars at all. Lions aim at continuing on as they are functionally (including but not limited to reproductive functioning). Except insofar as learning particular to any given lion has become integrated into that lion’s functionality, the functional organization of any particular lion is exhausted by being a lion – or more precisely: by being a male lion or being a female lion. The alternative they face – particular lions, that is – is either existing or ceasing to exist as they are functionally organized. Continuing to exist as, say, a lamb is not an option; and continuing on in a semi-functional, debilitated state aims at regaining full functionality, not remaining in such a diminished state. The stark alternative of life versus death enters the causal-explanatory picture at a different juncture, that of causing species of organisms to be as they are via the process of natural selection. If evolution as a process counts as goal-directed in some sense, then the alternative of life versus death would partially explain the teleology of *evolution*.)

p. 10 – How is an action both automatic and purposeful? My cat often acts voluntarily. She considers options – food dish or warm lap? – and decides. What is different about us is the number and kinds of alternatives we open up for ourselves, through various causal avenues, most of which are driven by the acquisition of conceptual knowledge. So I would put the point less starkly.

p. 16 ff. You might want to allow for “mixtures” of the four sorts of causes/explanations in play. For example, with regard to values, what does the most explaining with regard to the continued existence of tokens of certain value-types may depend on the specific nature of the value-types in question, social circumstances, etc. The continued existence of base-level chosen value-types may be explained best by strong psycho-biological tendencies and biological success. The continued existence of higher-level

chosen value-types in a liberal, individualistic society may be explained best by people aiming at their own overall, long-term happiness. The continued existence of value-types in traditional, resource-strapped or otherwise autonomy-unfriendly societies or social circumstances may be explained best by meme selection. What about borderline cases and cases of equally causally potent dimensions of functionality (or different dimensions of goal-directedness)?

pp. 17-18 – With regard to meme and happiness theories, what is meant by ‘need’ (or perhaps ‘psychological need’)? Do you take needs to exist only relative to goals or not? It would seem that, for meme theory, the goal, if there is one, is simply what in some sense works for people or what they find interesting. On the happiness theory as you lay it out, needs would seem to be *felt psychological needs*, not needs which exist relative to goals. Or is happiness a need in the relevant sense only relative to the goal of being happy? Regardless, though, your move is a very interesting way of trying to save Binswanger’s theory. If I understand you right, you work within Binswanger’s explanatory framework to determine the need (goal?) relative to which valuing as a type of thing, or particular value-types, continues to exist. It is a bit puzzling, though, how you square Binswanger and Mack: HB’s analysis may tell us something about goals, while EM is concerned with needs. It is not clear from what you say that EM takes needs to exist only relative to goals (so that, e.g., psychologically felt needs count as needs in the relevant sense). I think you could make things clearer by working out your view of the relationship between the concepts GOAL and NEED (and, of course, FUNCTION). Do you (or Mack) hold that needs exist only relative to goals?