

CHAPTER 2: LIFE AND NEEDS

Life as the Ultimate Value

Ethics is a body of universal principles that provide people with fundamental guidance in their choices. Plainly, moral principles are useful only to beings of conceptual consciousness, who can grasp them, and who furthermore possess free will and so must choose their actions. That's why ethics pertains to human beings, and not to stones, chipmunks or rhododendrons. At root, every ethic seeks to guide people toward an ideal or goal, usually the ideal of a "good life," based on a conception of what is of value. The Objectivist ethics is based on the principle that the ultimate value is life itself, and that the standard by which we measure the good life is "man's survival qua man," as Ayn Rand put it.

What is the logical basis of this view? Rand did not begin, as many philosophers have done, with assumptions about what things are of value. She began with a question: Why do we need the concept of value in the first place? What does it refer to? What facts of reality give rise to the concept? In other words, she followed the method implied by the Objectivist epistemology as outlined in the previous chapter: she sought to place the concept in its hierarchical context by tracing its roots back to observations of reality. The implications of her analysis are spelled out in Diagram 2.1.

Rand described value as "**that which one acts to gain and/or keep**" (**Premise 1a** of Diagram 2.1).¹ This description identifies *values* with ends, purposes and goals; and identifies *valuing* with the pursuit of goals. We can understand this identification by observing the different types of *goal-directed actions* and contrasting them with other types of action. The goals of which we are directly aware are our conscious purposes. These are the easiest cases of valuing to recognize, and the first kind of values a child learns about. We know introspectively that our purposeful actions are aimed toward goals, because we envision or consider the goal before acting. Our conscious goals include such things as a meal, a job, a vacation, a checkup at the doctor's, an education, a marriage, and so on. In valuing these things, we clearly seek to "gain and/or keep" them. In pursuing goals, we are directly aware of the ways in which we adapt our actions to achieve our purposes, as circumstances demand. And we are directly aware that our purposes aim at some benefit: they aim to achieve something we regard as good for us.²

Do we have to be aware of an action's purpose introspectively to know if it is adapted toward attaining a goal? Of course not: we can also observe goal-directed action from the outside. Suppose your friend gives you a ride to the office. You can infer his goal from the way he acts: he switches lanes to pass

slow cars and changes his route to avoid a traffic jam. If his car breaks down, he hails a taxi. All his different specific actions (turn left, turn right, stop, hail cab, etc.) have the effect of achieving the goal of getting you both to the office.

We can observe similar adaptation toward a goal in the realm of human action beyond ourselves, and also in the actions of animals and plants. Animals act for goals without rational deliberation and choice, and plants act for goals without conscious sensations or desires at all. All of these things exhibit the basic pattern we pointed out above: their actions adapt to achieve goals, and the goals are sought for the sake of some benefit they confer. Some philosophers believe that there are no values beyond those chosen by conscious minds.³ But values exist wherever an entity initiates action for some goal. When a plant, after being moved, alters its growth so as to bend its leaves toward the sun, that goal-directed action is a form of valuing. When a squirrel gathers nuts to obtain the food it needs, that is likewise an instance of valuing. The similarities between these and human purposes are more essential than the differences.⁴

Now that we have surveyed the kinds of goal-directed action that the concept of value integrates, we must consider the essential characteristics of such actions. In her discussion of value in the essay “The Objectivist Ethics,” Rand noted that “the concept ‘value’ . . . presupposes an answer to the question: of value to *whom* and for *what*? It presupposes an entity capable of acting to achieve a goal in the face of an alternative.” We can put Rand’s point this way: for anything to be a value in the first place, it must fulfill two basic conditions that are implicit in the very concept of value:

- 1) There must be some one or some thing who values the thing in question, and obviously, that valuer must be capable of initiating goal-directed actions. It is an important insight of Rand’s that a value can exist only if *someone* or *something* “acts to gain and/or keep” it. This point is a crucial one to bear in mind as you proceed through ethics. It is traditional in philosophy and common in everyday usage to say that something would be “good,” “better,” “ideal,” and so forth, without specifying to whom it would be of value. Philosophers often speak of the “the Good” as if this were detached from the particular affairs of individual people. But in the Objectivist view, there is no “good” apart from the good of particular agents.⁵ In ethics it is always useful to check one’s premises, by asking of a proposed value: to whom is it of value?

- 2) The valuer must face an alternative in light of which the goal makes a difference. Here the relevant question to ask of a proposed value is: valuable for what? It is inherent in the phenomenon of valuing that the

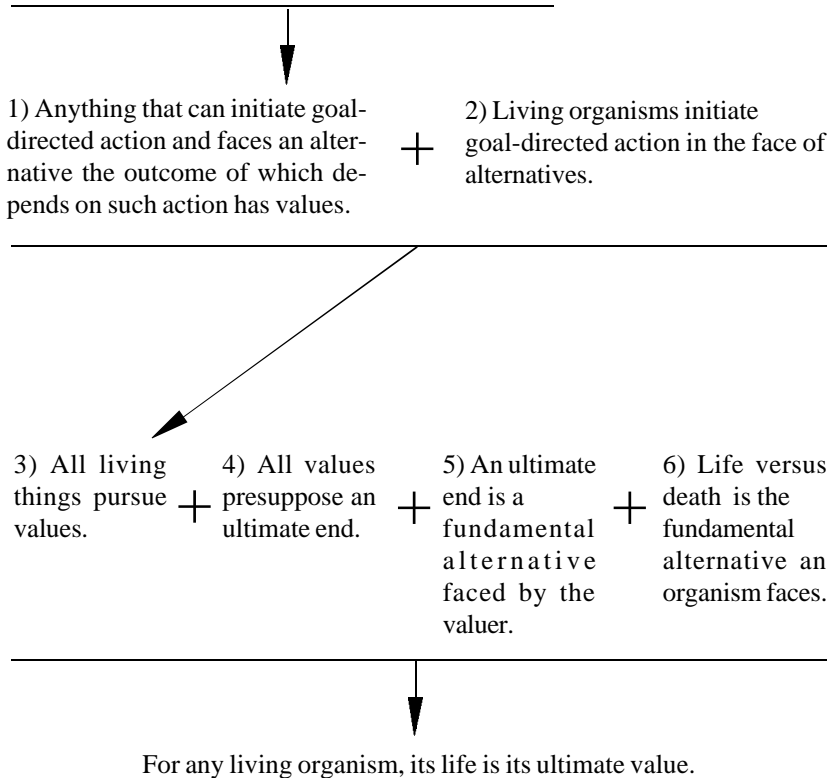
goal is sought because of some benefit it provides the valuer. Achieving the value or failing to achieve it must in some way affect the agent's fate: its existence, well-being, capacity for further action, or some other significant attribute. This presupposes that the agent faces an alternative of some kind, a set of possible outcomes that can in some way be ranked as better or worse for it.

Diagram 2.1: Life and Value

Inductive Evidence:

1, 2, 4, 5, 6: *Observation of living organisms, biology.*

1a) Value is that which one acts to gain and/or keep



These two implications about value are formulated together in **Premise 1** of the diagram: **anything that can initiate goal-directed action and faces an alternative the outcome of which depends on such action, has values.** They follow directly from Premise 1a.

Premises 1a and 1 state the connection between the concepts of purpose and of value. The next step is to recognize the connection between those concepts and the phenomenon of life. **Premise 2** asserts that **living organisms initiate goal-directed actions in the face of alternatives**, and thus fulfil the conditions for value that are identified in Premise 1. Living things by nature are goal-seekers who face alternatives. This point is supported inductively by examining living organisms. That is, we are drawing on the same observations as when we considered premises 1a and 1, but while in that case we were identifying a distinctive type of action, and the conditions presupposed by it, here we are identifying the types of entities that meet those conditions. The concepts of *value*, *goal-directed action*, and *life* pertain to the same referents, regarded from different points of view. *Valuing*, *goal-directed action*, and *the maintenance of life* refer to the same class of actions, on the part of the same category of entities.

The induction behind Premise 2 proceeds as follows: Based on the observation of living things, we can conclude that all living things share the following essential characteristics:

- ***Living organisms can initiate goal-directed action.***

This has two aspects:

- a. Living action is self-generated.

Living creatures act from a source within themselves. When a lion chases a gazelle, the gazelle is not pulling the lion, rather the lion is generating its own running motion. Notice that machines that act from stored energy (such as those with gasoline or electric motors) *seem* lifelike because they share this characteristic.

- b. Living action is goal-directed.

The biological sciences describe a vast realm of beings that act adaptively for goals. When its environment changes, and it confronts impediments, an organism changes its actions and often even its structure to adopt means of reaching some end. Only a few machines (heat-seeking missiles, for instance) are able to act adaptively to achieve a goal, and even then the goal is relatively simple—and it is a goal designed into the machine by humans, who are the real goal-seekers in such cases. By contrast, the adaptive responses the primitive amoeba uses to secure its food and avoid harm are far more sophisticated than those of any machine constructed to date. Goal-directed action is characteristic of living organisms as a class.

- ***Organisms continually face alternatives***

Living organisms are enormously complex and the actions they perform are enormously diverse—from the chemical actions of simple one-celled animals to the global ambitions of statesmen. Across this enormous range, however, such actions aim at benefits to the agents, who act in the face of alternative outcomes that are better or worse for them. A tree sends out roots in search of the water it needs; obtaining or failing to obtain water makes a difference to the tree, and that is why trees have acquired this capacity through evolution. Human beings, and other animals that possess consciousness, act from desire, and thus face the alternative of succeeding or failing to satisfy their desires.⁶

We can conclude that **all living things pursue values (Premise 3)**.⁷ But the conclusion of Diagram 1 says more than this. It specifies life itself as the ultimate value for any living thing. To arrive at this conclusion, we must engage in further induction from our observations of living things, induction that results in three other premises (4, 5, and 6) that emerge from our analysis of valuing.

If actions aim toward a goal, that goal is an end, and the actions are means to it. One goal, say playing tennis, may be a means to a greater goal, such as getting in shape. A tree's goal of obtaining water from the earth is a means of engaging in internal self-sustaining chemical processes that require water. Means and ends form chains in this way. Each chain must end somewhere. If one has a complex hierarchy of means and ends, then each of the means-end chains of which it is constructed must conclude in some ultimate end. An ultimate value is a value to which other values are means but is not itself a means to further ends. It is an end-in-itself. As Ayn Rand noted, "without an ultimate goal or end, there can be no lesser goals or means: a series of means going off into an infinite progression toward a nonexistent end is a metaphysical and epistemological impossibility."⁸ This is the point summarized in **Premise 4: All values presuppose an ultimate end.**

Since the end sought by a goal-directed action must make a difference to the valuer in light of some alternative it faces, **an ultimate end is a fundamental alternative faced by the valuer (Premise 5)**. For example, the tennis-player in the preceding paragraph faced the alternative of improving or failing to improve his physical condition. But is this an ultimate end? No, because his physical condition is not the fundamental alternative he faces; his condition matters because of its relationship to his health. And why does his health matter? Somewhere we must come to a fundamental alternative, one that underlies and explains the derivative ones. In a sequence of means and ends, a fundamental alternative is one that explains why other alternatives make a difference to the agent. The same is true for the tree that sends out roots in order to get water, which it needs in order to engage in internal chemical processes. In these and all other cases, according to Ayn Rand, we arrive eventually at a single fundamental alternative: **life versus death is the fundamental alternative an organism**

faces (Premise 6).

Organisms act to secure their continued existence, and if they fail to act, as Ayn Rand observed, they quickly die. Living things encounter many alternatives: while a flower blooms, it may be blown left or right, it may be warm or cold, it may attract bees, or not, and so on. But existence versus non-existence is the most *fundamental* alternative, because nonexistence precludes all other alternatives. When a flower wilts, dies, and is no more, then it is not blown around, it is not warm or cold, it is not there to attract bees. Of course, this isn't merely a fundamental alternative for living things: a structure of any sort may cease to exist. The structure of a sun can collapse; houses can burn down; windows sometimes shatter. However only living things act in response to this most basic of alternatives. "Life is a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action," Ayn Rand observed.⁹ The difference between a live organism and a dead one is not its shape or color, but the kinds of actions it takes. Living things not only *do* value, they *must* value, or cease to exist. That is why life is fundamental to an organism. It is the reason that life is metaphysically an end-in-itself: the essence of a living organism's nature is its capacity to initiate goal-directed actions, and in acting to preserve its life it acts to preserve that very capacity.

We have now established the premises we need to reach the **conclusion** of Diagram 2.1: **For any living organism, its life is its ultimate value.** This conclusion integrates two lines of arguments. The inductive evidence subsumed in premises 1 and 2 imply that all living things are valuers. The inductive evidence subsumed in premises 4, 5, and 6 tell us that their lives are their ultimate values.

One question that is sometimes raised about this derivation is whether there must be a *single* ultimate value to which all other values are means. Why couldn't a valuer's hierarchy of means and ends terminate in a range of ultimate values that are each ends-in-themselves, without a higher end to which they are all means? The basic answer is implicit in the premises we have already reviewed. If an organism had more than one ultimate end, what would it do when those ends conflicted? They might require contradictory actions, with no single higher end to determine which action should be taken at a given time. The alternative to having an ultimate end is chaotic action and indecision.

The most basic living things act in ways that are determined by their natures: they act, and respond, but do not choose their actions. In this way, they are like sophisticated computer programs. But like a program, if their actions become inconsistent they malfunction, break down, and fail to act. If a computer program has a bug, it produces inaccurate data; in the worst case, it "crashes." In a living being, an example of such a "bug" would be a cancerous tumor. A tumor grows out of control, destroying the body. It is an organ of the body acting without regard to the fundamental alternative. When an organism

develops such a “bug,” it tends to die. So the actions of healthy organisms are aimed at a single ultimate and fundamental value of life.¹⁰

We human beings have to hold our ultimate value by choice.¹¹ Unlike simpler organisms, we can choose values that are against or unrelated to the value of life. This is precisely why we need to hold our ultimate value explicitly. Our ability to choose doesn’t make holding inconsistent values any more effective for us than for a bacterium. If one were to choose not to hold any ultimate value, some of one’s values would be means to competing ends, and the result would be indeterminacy, indecision, and contradiction. We *can* act for contradictory ends, and that is what most historical theories of ethics have implicitly counseled us to do, but if we do so we will experience frustration, incoherence, suffering, and even death. If we want our actions to be consistent and coherent, and therefore efficacious, we must organize our value hierarchy on the basis of an ultimate value or end-in-itself.

Because human beings need to identify their values by deliberate thinking, and pursue those values by choice, their actions do not always aim at goals that in fact support life. It is possible to value things that are not actually valuable by the standard of life. Of course, if someone chooses not to live in the first place, he ceases to be a valuer at all. Short of death, however, it is possible for us to make a mistake about what to value, either because we have embraced the wrong moral code or because we have failed to apply a correct code properly to the particulars of a situation. In addition, through evasion, we can ignore the long-term in favor of short-term goals, ignore our commitments in order to pursue other desires, and so on. Some Objectivists taken this to mean that we need two concepts of value: In this scheme, Rand’s basic concept of “that which one seeks to gain and/or keep” is the concept of the *valued*, and acting to obtain it is *valuing*; whereas the standard of life gives us the concept of what is objectively *valuable*.

We believe this approach is not compatible with the derivation of the conclusion that life is the ultimate value. That derivation is based on the convergence of the concepts of goal-directed action, value, and life, which designate the same phenomenon in reality. The phenomenon is a complex one, and for technical purposes we can distinguish its different aspects. In particular we can distinguish the capacity to initiate goal-directed action from the fundamental alternatives that give such action its point. In economics, for example, it is valid to abstract the human pursuit of ends from the question of whether those ends actually serve life in accordance with true moral principles. In medicine, conversely, it is valid to study the conditions that actually promote life in abstraction from the patient’s willingness to pursue those conditions. In philosophy, however, we must recognize that each element exists only in the context of the other. Means and ends go together.

On the one hand, we cannot speak of what is valuable except in refer-

ence to an agent capable of initiating action to obtain it. We can abstract from the particular nature, capacities, and choices of such an agent, but we cannot abstract altogether from the need for some agent. We cannot ignore the question, valuable to whom?

On the other hand, we cannot speak of valuing except for an agent who acts in the face of an alternative. If there were agents capable of initiating action but for which nothing was better or worse (as in Rand's hypothetical example of the immortal robot), we would not need to distinguish their actions as a fundamentally different category from mechanical, non-goal-directed actions. Human beings in particular, as living beings, do face the alternative of life or death; their capacities for pursuing goals, including the conscious capacities for thinking, desiring, planning, etc., evolved to support the satisfaction of their needs as living beings. When a person makes an error and values something that does not in fact serve his life, it is normally an error, nothing more. The person still seeks to promote his life—that is still the fundamental alternative that makes his action purposive in the first place. For example, a person who gets food poisoning from a spoiled piece of meat was obviously not deliberately trying to get sick.

As we proceed through this book, we will examine many other values that are required by life. These values are not as obviously connected with life as physical health is; that is why man needs a moral code to identify them. People may fail to achieve such values either because they do not know to seek them in the first place, or because they adopt mistaken means of achieving them. For example, someone might mistakenly seek approval from others as a source of self-esteem. In such a case, achieving or failing to achieve self-esteem is the immediate alternative that makes the pursuit of approval an instance of valuing, and that makes approval itself a value for that person. It is not just that approval is something the person seeks to gain; his motivation for seeking it traces back to the basic alternative of life or death, which is the objective standard of value. As a point of fact, there is simply no way to construct a coherent range of ends that excludes life.

As an interesting reflection of this fact, consider the kinds of values that philosophers and theologians have advocated as bases of major ethical systems. Historically, the major candidates for the ultimate human value have tended to depend on the idea of life, albeit in a distorted form. For example, many religions, including Judaism, Christianity and Islam, extol sacrifice and duty in the real world, but hold eternal life in the hereafter as the ultimate end in ethics. While they seem to deny that life is the goal, in fact they depend on it: the afterlife that they envision in paradise is just life in an imaginary, false metaphysical context.

The great Indian religions have put up more of struggle against life as the ultimate value in ethics. Hinduism avoids addressing the fundamental alternative by presuming that death is not actually possible and that we are endlessly

reborn into new lives. Hinduism thus takes the context of life for granted, and defines its highest ends as improved kinds of life: life as a wise priest, for instance, rather than as a dung beetle. Buddhism is the religion that flirts most explicitly with true self-abnegation. Derived from the Hindu world-view of endless reincarnation, Buddhism in its original form regards escape from the illusions of the apparent world and the self as the proper end of human action. But the forms of Buddhism most commonly practiced usually offer the promise of union with Buddha or afterlife in a supernatural paradise as the reward of virtue, allowing the ultimate value of life to creep in through the back door, as it were.

Non-religious ethics also trade implicitly on the nature of life as the one, true end-in-itself. The currently fashionable theory known as “sociobiology,” for example, holds that our proper values derive from life, but not from one’s own life. Instead sociobiologists hold that, thanks to evolution, we achieve satisfaction by acting in ways that propagate our genes. The problem with this view, put briefly, is that it fails to recognize the importance of reason and choice in human life. Sociobiology as an ethic confuses the means by which life comes about with life itself. Our evolutionary heritage is part of the context in which we pursue our lives, but it is one’s life itself which is a unitary, ongoing, self-supporting process.

Many non-religious ethics consider the good to consist in fulfilling one’s duty to ends outside of oneself. Usually, duty still serves a kind of life, but one divorced from the individual. Collectivists such as statist, nationalists or tribalists hold the “life” of the state, nation or tribe as their ultimate end. Duty ethics are impractical to the extent that they demand that people act against their own lives, so it is no accident that such philosophies have led to terrible bloodshed in wars and revolutions. Their most ardent followers literally tend to die out.¹² Collectivists must either act inconsistently by valuing their lives over the collective, or must sacrifice their lives in war or service. In fact most advocates of such philosophies as nationalism use the collective, hypocritically, as a means to advance their own lives.

Immanuel Kant is the odd man out among ethical thinkers: he thought duty was an end-in-itself, without reference to any other life, benefit or reward of any kind. But while life is actually its own reward, duty is not. By separating virtue from the possibility of benefit or gain, Kant’s ethical system does not pose an alternative to life as the ultimate value; it attempts to erase the connection between virtue and values. It is this radical separation of the idea of a value or goal from its actual basis in fact, that makes Kant’s approach the antithesis of the Objectivist one.

We can see from this brief survey of religion and moral philosophy that the Objectivist analysis of life as the basis of value brings out a truth that has implicitly influenced conceptions of value throughout history, despite their

explicit differences with Objectivism. This truth is that life is the metaphysical end-in-itself to which other values are means.

We can also see from Rand's analysis of value that the pursuit of this end-in-itself includes different aspects or dimensions that we will refer back to in explaining the logical structure of the Objectivist ethics. 1) A valuer initiates action, exercising whatever capacities it has for pursuing goals. So we can compare and contrast valuers along the dimension of what capacities they possess, the different types of action they can initiate. 2) A valuer acts for a goal that would be of some benefit, so a second dimension of comparison is the nature of the goal, the specific kind of value it represents. 3) Finally, there is the beneficiary of goal-directed action, the person or thing for whom the benefit is sought. If life is the ultimate value, the organism is ultimately acting to benefit itself. But in doing so, it may seek specific benefits for others as well, as when animals feed their young.

These are the three basic dimensions to be found in all goal-directed action, and we can use them to differentiate the different types of action that living organisms engage in. Human beings are distinctive in two ways that apply to each of the dimensions. First, human beings possess free will, so we must pursue life as an ultimate value by choice. It is possible for a human being, unlike the members of other species, to choose not to initiate action, and specifically not to initiate the act of thought; as we have seen, man's volition is fundamentally his power to choose whether to think or not. Human beings can choose not to seek ends that are objectively valuable by the standard of life; they can even choose to end their lives through suicide. Finally, humans can choose not to benefit themselves but to subordinate their own good to that of others—family, tribe, the nation, the environment. This is indeed what most other codes of morality demand. Secondly, our mode of cognition is conceptual, which means we need to identify by rational thought the proper actions to initiate, ends to seek, and beneficiaries to act for. This is why humans, unlike other species, need morality as a body of principles in order to live successfully. On the foundation laid in this section, with life as the ultimate value, we can go on to develop the Objectivist morality.

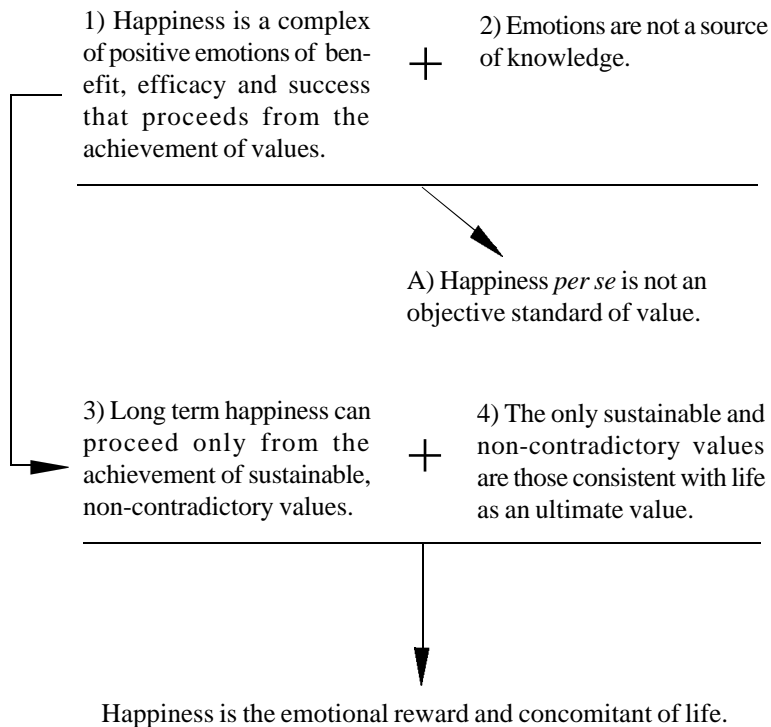
Life and Happiness

The most plausible alternative to life as the ultimate value is that offered by Utilitarians, Epicureans and others who believe that happiness should be one's final goal. Happiness is one's emotional experience of success, benefit, efficacy, and well-being, and because it is felt directly, it seems self-evidently good. Objectivism holds that pursuing one's happiness, properly understood, is the same as pursuing one's life: it not only *feels* good, it *is* good. This is why, as the book progresses, we will often speak of the end in ethics as "life

and happiness.” However, since happiness is an emotional state—and a complex one—it is a derivative phenomenon, not the starting place for ethics. Diagram 2.2 analyzes the profound connection between happiness and the ultimate value of life.

Premise 1 states that **Happiness is a complex of positive emotions of benefit, efficacy and success that proceeds from the achievement of valued goals.** Happiness is not a single emotion, but a complex admixture of positive feelings such as joy, confidence, excitement, affection, accomplishment, and pleasure. It includes the overall sense that life is going well, that one has achieved and is able to enjoy the important values in one’s life. Of course, one can be happy even in trying circumstances: simply being engaged with and successfully struggling with one’s difficulties results in a profound sense of well-being and satisfaction, and one’s exultation in success may be even more keen in such circumstances than it would if one were more secure. Happiness is at least as much a function of internal values, such as pride and the possession of a good

Diagram 2.2: Happiness and Life



character, as of external values such as wealth. Nevertheless, a person who has lost the values that are important to him, or failed to obtain them in the first place, will not be happy. The emotions that proceed from failure, loss, and deprivation are negative ones, including pain, frustration, anger, disgust, and so on.

Since happiness results from the achievement of values, the Objectivist ethics considers happiness a legitimate description of our ultimate end: it is the internal experience of meeting the requirements of life. But it cannot serve as a standard for identifying those requirements. Rand described the distinction between purpose and standard as follows:

a ‘standard is an abstract principle that serves as a measurement or gauge to guide a man’s choices in the achievement of a concrete, specific purpose. ‘That which is required for the survival of man qua man’ is an abstract principle that applies to every individual man...

Man must choose his actions, values and goals by the standard of that which is proper to man—in order to achieve, maintain, fulfill and enjoy that ultimate value, that end in itself, which is his own life.¹³

The significance of this distinction is that a standard is a principle; it is a form of cognition; it is based on our knowledge of what will and will not be of benefit, and of what is and is not a fruitful means of achieving it. Happiness, however, is an emotion, and as such is not a form of cognition.

This reasoning is analyzed in the first line of Diagram 2.1. In addition to the definition of happiness as expressed in Premise 1, we rely on **Premise 2, emotions are not a source of knowledge**, which we established in Chapter 1. Emotions are not forms of cognition, but result from subconscious integrations of judgments of what is valuable. Emotion gives a direct, affective experience of what benefit and loss are, of what is good and what is bad. Emotions provide us with psychological motivation. But human emotion is the product of a volitional process, and as we’ve seen, it can give false indications of value, if it is based on mistaken judgments in the past. This point is **conclusion A** in the diagram: **happiness *per se* is not an objective standard of value**. As premises 1 and 2 together indicate, we can’t simply assume, because we feel happy doing something, that it is the right thing to do. At least in the short term, feelings of happiness may depend as much on what our goals are, as on the moral status of those goals. Genghis Khan, for example, is reported to have declared that there was no greater joy than slaying one’s male enemy, stealing his goods, raping his women, and enslaving his children; given his hierarchy of values, maybe it did give him a kind of fierce joy.¹⁴

The second step in the diagram provides a fuller explanation of why there can be a divergence between short-term pleasures and long-term happi-

ness. It also sheds further light on the relationship between happiness and life as ultimate ends. Given our understanding of happiness, as expressed in premise 1, it follows that **happiness over the long term can only proceed from the achievement of sustainable, non-contradictory goals (Premise 3)**. If acting to achieve one's goals cannot be sustained, then the feelings that come from success in that action cannot be sustained, either. And if one's goals are fundamentally contradictory, success in one naturally brings both joy and sorrow, since it entails failure in another. As a lasting, pervasive state of mind, happiness can only proceed from the successful pursuit of values over the long term. Ayn Rand called happiness "a state of non-contradictory joy — a joy without penalty or guilt, a joy that does not clash with any of your values and does not work for your destruction...."¹⁵ One can feel emotions of joy or satisfaction, to a certain extent, from achieving any goal upon which one sets one's mind—that's why conclusion A is true. But it is only success in attaining a harmonious, self-sustaining set of values that can lead to happiness in the long term.

The next step in our reasoning is the recognition that **the only sustainable and non-contradictory values are those consistent with life as an ultimate value (Premise 4)**. The basic evidence for this assertion comes from the analysis of value at the beginning of this chapter, which established that life is the ultimate value. We noted there that values form hierarchies of means and ends, and that a hierarchy presupposes an ultimate end. Without a unitary ultimate end, values lower down in the hierarchy can be in conflict. At a minimum, they make competing demands on our time and other resources—we cannot simultaneously watch a movie and study for an exam—and we need to make such choices by appealing to a higher-level purpose. And sometimes potential values conflict in more direct ways. A sumptuous dessert every night for dinner is not (for most people) compatible with a lean figure. Once again, we must appeal to a higher-level purpose in order to pursue a consistent set of values. For the reasons given in section 1 of this chapter, life itself is the only thing that can serve as an ultimate value, because only through pursuing it do we confront our most fundamental alternative.

As we proceed through the book, we will see that our needs as human beings are complex, as are the capacities—especially the faculty of reason—that we have available for meeting those needs. Avoiding conflict and confusion as we pursue our values over the span of a lifetime, coordinating our actions across a wide array of concrete situations, is a challenge even with a firm commitment to one's life as an ultimate value and standard for selecting derivative values. The rest of this book, then, will provide further support for and illustration of Premise 4.

Ayn Rand said that **happiness is the emotional "reward and concomitant" of life**, which is the final conclusion we draw from the diagram.¹⁶ Happiness is best described as the affective experience of success in living. It is

what one feels, psychologically, when one is living well.¹⁷ That is the sense in which it is the concomitant of life. (This does not mean, however, that happiness occurs as an automatic result of achieving the values that life requires. If we want the full benefit of our emotions, we have to attend to them and the integrations that produce them, so that our feelings of good and bad coincide with our knowledge of good and bad. It is a fact of human psychology that if we have to fight our emotions or distance ourselves from them, we become less alert to opportunities and less engaged with our values. This is why Rand made the harmony of reason and emotion such an important theme in her novels.)¹⁸ Happiness is the “reward” of life in that moments of great happiness are the times when one feels most profoundly the success and achievement of which life is made up, and by which life is sustained.

The philosophies that take happiness as an ethical standard all trade, implicitly, on the close link between happiness and life over the long term. It is the fact that a consistent happiness proceeds from pursuing life that makes it possible for happiness to seem to be self-sufficient. The Objectivist analysis of happiness recognizes this link explicitly, and therefore does not accept happiness as the basis of ethics, but rather as the way one experiences, emotionally, the ultimate value of life. Happiness *feels* good, because it tends to follow from values that *are* good.

The Basic Logical Structure of the Objectivist Ethics

Now that we have established the principle of life as the ultimate value, we can apply it to man as a specific type of organism. With the principle in hand, it is a matter of causal demonstration to establish the content of ethics and politics. Our procedure is to demonstrate which things are causally conducive to survival: that which produces, furthers, and the protects the life of a human being is right, good, and valuable —to that human being. And we must show which things are causally detrimental to the life of a human being: that which destroys, diminishes, or threatens a human life is wrong, bad, disvaluable.

As Ayn Rand put it:

Life or death is man’s only fundamental alternative. To live is his basic act of choice. If he chooses to live, a rational ethics will tell him what principles of action are required to implement his choice. If he does not choose to live, nature will take its course.

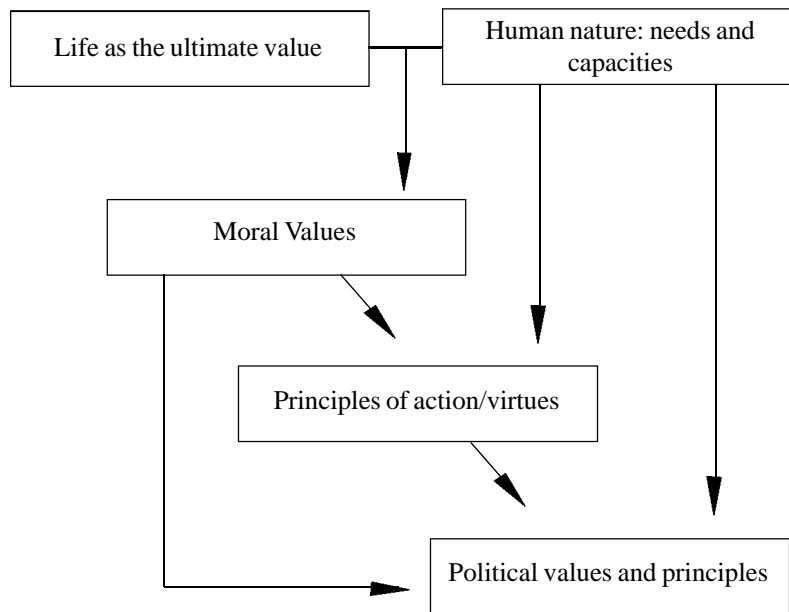
Reality confronts man with a great many “musts,” but all of these are conditional; the formula of realistic necessity is: “You must, if —“ and the “if” stands for man’s choice: “—if you want to achieve a certain goal.” You must eat, if you want to survive. You must work, if you want to eat. You must think, if you want to work. You must look at

reality, if you want to think – if you want to know what to do – if you want to know what goals to choose – if you want to know how to achieve them.¹⁹

The result of the method of causal demonstration is the basic logical structure of the Objectivist ethics, which is outlined in Diagram 2.3. Before we address a particular issue, such as the virtue of rationality or the theory of rights, we must first construct the preceding steps. Beginning with the ultimate value of life, and the particular needs of human life, we can determine which values are proper to us. In light of those values, and taking account of our capacities, we can infer what actions we should take, that is, what the virtues are. We can then derive our political values and principles by combining our knowledge of the virtues with what we've established about values and the foundations of ethics. We won't finish covering this ground until the last chapter, but Diagram 2.3 gives you a road map of the route we'll be taking.

Diagram 2.3: The Basic Logical Structure of Ethics

Induction occurs at every stage.



Our task for this section is to understand better what it means to draw an arrow from the top of Diagram 2.3 to one of the lower boxes. That is, what does this method of causal demonstration amount to?

To make causal demonstrations in Ethics we have to look to a vast variety of evidence from the world around us. In this book, we can only indicate what this evidence would be, and point to where it may be sought. Evidence of some sort can be found in everything that is related to or has some impact on human life, so most of human knowledge can be relevant to our reasoning. One way to begin to get a handle on such a vast body of evidence is to sort it into relevant categories. We can identify three broad (and still enormous) areas of evidence: 1) the physical world or nature, 2) society, and 3) the nature of man. These match well with established areas of scientific investigation.

1) *Evidence from Nature*. Ethics must take into account the natural world and the opportunities it offers for human action. This means that new scientific discoveries, which expand our knowledge of the world, have implications for our ethical conclusions. Ayn Rand remarked, for instance, that it would have been difficult to fully understand the role of reason in material production before modern science and the onset of the Industrial Revolution.

2) *Evidence from Society*. The nature of society and social interaction is another important causal factor in considering the ethics. Just as we must base our actions on what is physically possible, so we must take into account what society can or may do. The evidence of the social sciences will have implications for our positions. For example, our understanding of the values to be gained from living by voluntary trade depends on the theory of the division of labor and the facts about trade that economists have studied. Without this evidence we might conclude, as the ancients did, that the sacrifice of one to another is unavoidable.

3) *Evidence from Human Nature*. Most crucially, we must consider the needs and capacities of human beings. In other words, we must base our understanding of what is good for man on our knowledge of human nature. Medicine, psychology and other fields that study man offer important evidence. Our understanding of moral character, for instance, which underlies the virtues of integrity and justice, depends on psychological facts. Epistemological insights on the powers and limitations of consciousness will also strongly affect our conclusions.

Context and Ethics

In saying that science is an important source of evidence for ethics, we are not saying that morality wavers from day-to-day depending on the latest issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine*. In this text we are considering morality at the most general level, and at this level it is based on facts that by

and large are accessible to everyone. New evidence about the effect of saturated fat on heart disease may mean that you should change your diet, but it won't change the fact that you need food and must produce it or trade for it. However, technological changes do sometimes affect areas of life long thought immutable, and we must look out for these at times. For instance, the Objectivist treatment of sex distinguishes its role in reproduction from its value as a source of psychological visibility. Before this century's advances in reliable birth control technology, it would have been extremely difficult to pursue the latter value independently of the choice to have children. So this particular scientific advance changed the presuppositions that underlie ethical principles concerning, among other things, marriage and chastity.

The principles of the Objectivist ethics are supported inductively in the context of normal life. Their primary purpose is to address situations that are likely to affect our lives, situations such as finding a job and pursuing a career in the workplace, forming friendships and love relationships, raising a family, and participating in organizations, to name only a few. These principles address all the situations one would normally expect to encounter. Unlike a random list of moral do's and don'ts, they form a comprehensive ethic, a moral code for all of life, and for a full life. Nevertheless, certain real but very unusual situations fall outside the scope of these principles. There were real people on the Titanic, for example, facing the decision of how to allot the limited number of lifeboats. Many people regard such emergencies as test cases for ethics, and to teach or disseminate the Objectivist ethics, one must be prepared to discuss them. But one should do so with a clear understanding of the ways in which they are and are not relevant to ethics.

In the broadest sense, the Objectivist ethics always provides a modicum of guidance, even in extreme circumstances. Regardless of context, one's life is one's ultimate value. As long as one chooses to live, one should always try to act in a practical manner to secure one's own life and values. Because such emergencies normally pose direct and severe threats to survival, the best advice is to get out of the situation and restore normal conditions as quickly as possible.²⁰ Those who invoke emergencies in ethical discussions, however, are rarely concerned with practical issues of how to deal with real emergencies when they occur. Their concern is normally to conduct thought experiments that will test the validity of moral principles. In this respect, the primary significance of these situations is methodological—and that is the reason we raise them here.

The first point to appreciate is that emergencies by nature are rare events, and they are discontinuous with the normal context in which we live. It's usually obvious, and strikingly unusual, to find oneself in a situation where one's life is pitted against that of another, for instance. Because emergencies are dissimilar to the normal environment, the normal principles do not apply. This does not

invalidate those principles. As products of cognitive integration, according to the Objectivist epistemology, they are based upon and incorporate into their content the evidence on which they are based, which in this case is the observation of and induction from the similarities in normal life. It violates the contextual theory of knowledge to treat these principles as floating absolutes, detached from the cognitive context in which they are established.

Secondly, the principles we are going to discuss form a hierarchy among themselves, with some derived first and others later. In particular, principles for how we should deal with each other depend on more fundamental principles about our basic relationship to reality as individuals and about how we should meet our own basic needs. Most cases of emergencies, like that of the lifeboat, tend to raise questions about inter-personal or social morality. A purely existential emergency, such as being trapped alone in an avalanche, seems morally uninteresting: as long as other people aren't involved, *of course* one should do whatever one can to survive! It is the equation of morality with social morality, the equation of what one *should* do with how one *should treat others*, that gives lifeboat-style emergencies such prominence in the broader culture. But social morality, for Objectivism, is derivative; the relevant principles come later in the hierarchy and cannot be considered in isolation from the more fundamental principles. In one way or another, for example, emergencies are situations in which the interests of different people seem to conflict, and this is often taken as a refutation of the Objectivist principle that the interests of rational men do not conflict. But that principle is based on the more basic principle that it is in our interest as humans to live independently, by reason and production. This principle applies to normal situations in which production and independent action are possible, as they are generally not in emergencies. If this underlying principle does not apply in this context, then we cannot assume that the derivative conflict-of-interest principle applies, either. Treating emergencies as a test case for that principle tears that principle out of its context in the hierarchy of the ethics.

There is another kind of social “emergency” situation that is quite common. This is the kind of situation that proceeds from dealing with people who act irrationally, and especially violently. Since people have free will, it is a part of the normal context to expect that one may need to defend oneself against others, or that one's country may, through no irrational aggression on the part of its citizens or government, become involved in a war. Then, too, one may find in one's normal life that because one's government does not respect rights, few people are able to get by as independent producers and traders; this is what normal life was like in the former Soviet Union, for instance. All these are cases of values being threatened by the immoral use of force, either at the personal level, in the case of a mugger, or at the political level, in the case of an unsought war or unjust regime. We will discuss the means of controlling such threats at

the social level when we discuss politics and government in chapter 7. As we discuss social ethics, especially in chapter 6, we will address the question of whether coercion can be a reliable means to gain values more generally.

Therefore, the context of our discussion of ethics has to be the basic circumstances of life that one can reasonably expect to encounter. Largely, these raise issues of human nature and physical possibility. Is it possible to live by production and trade? Is it possible to live by reason? Because politics is a derivative branch of ethics, we cannot take the given political circumstances of any country as something basic: unlike human nature, a political situation can be changed. Thus our ethical reasoning will depend on showing that our code of morality can be widely applied in human life, that lifeboat emergencies are rare, and that coercion on both the personal and political levels is not a reliable means of supporting one's life.

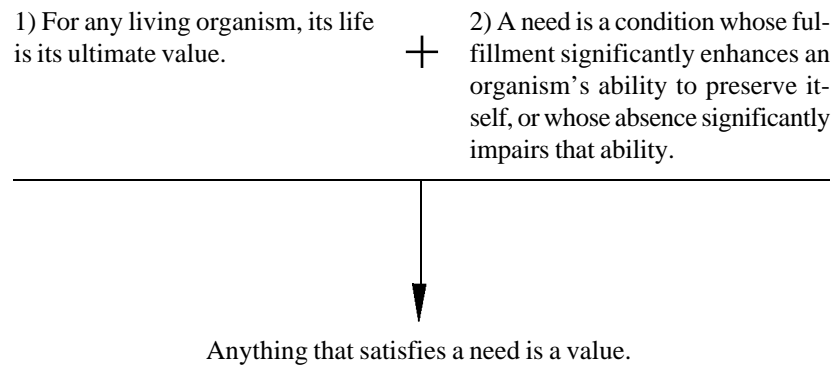
As you think about the moral arguments in this book, you should consider situations that you expect to encounter in life, and judge how well each argument addresses them, bearing in mind the foregoing caveats regarding political circumstances. It hardly needs saying that imaginary situations that are unreal, impractical, and irrelevant are certainly not worthy of consideration. Only situations that could occur in real life are worth looking into, despite the admiration that so many scholars of philosophy have for zany "hypothetical" situations.

So we will proceed through the ethics as an exercise in causal demonstration in the context of normal life. With life as our ultimate value, our understanding of *human nature* will allow us to determine what man's proper *moral values* are. Knowing these, we can determine what principles of action are appropriate for obtaining those values. In other words, from our values we can discover the *virtues*. With our ethical principles in hand, we can then determine the proper principles for evaluating social institutions.

Needs

Needs are the conditions that must be fulfilled in order to produce, further, or protect an individual's life. The role of needs in the ethics is analyzed in Diagram 2.4. Its **Premise 1** reiterates the conclusion of Diagram 2.1: **For any living organism, its life is its ultimate value. Premise 2** defines "need:" **A need is a condition whose presence significantly enhances an organism's ability to preserve itself, or whose absence significantly impairs that ability.** Premise 2 is an inductive generalization, one that is implicit in the practice of biologists, and for which the evidence is the nature of living organisms. The place of biological needs in the logical structure of Objectivism is this: since one's life is one's ultimate value, one has to know what one *needs* for the maintenance of life in order to know what to seek as a value.

Diagram 2.4: Needs and Values



The needs of a living organism determine its goals. In other words, its needs determine its values. This is the **conclusion** of Diagram 2.4: **anything that satisfies a need is a value**. Of course, when we speak colloquially of a need, we mean merely that something is necessary in order to do or get something. If one wants to unscrew a water pipe, one needs a pipe-wrench, for example. And indeed, given one's goal in this case, a pipe wrench is a value. Here, however, we are concerned with the most fundamental kind of needs: biological needs. A biological need is also necessary for something, but that "something" is life itself. Oxygen is such a necessity: we cannot survive without it for more than a few minutes.

Something that fulfills a need does not necessarily have to affect the individual's life immediately or catastrophically. If a person fails to get vitamin C, for instance, he does not feel any immediate effect. But as days go by he will become weaker. His gums may bleed and his teeth fall out as he suffers from scurvy. Eventually, the lack of vitamin C can kill him. Similarly, the loss of a friend rarely kills someone, but it narrows one's circle of intercourse and deprives one of aid and comfort in difficult times, cuts off a habitual fellowship and interdependence, among other effects. All of these consequences tend to make life harder than it otherwise would be.

There is an altruistic ethical doctrine, made famous by the Marxist dictum "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need," which holds that needs are ethically primary. That is, the mere fact that one person has a need implies a moral claim on other people. But in Objectivism, it is one's individual life that is primary. One's needs fit into the logical structure of ethics as aspects of furthering one's life. The needs of others have a different

moral significance. Just as one's own needs are directly significant only to oneself, so the needs of others are directly significant only to them. To understand how the needs of others are relevant to one's *own* life is a somewhat complex matter, one that depends on the analysis of friendship and love in terms of a need for visibility, communication, and economic exchange that we will be developing in future chapters.

Capacities

It would be absurd to determine how one *should* act before figuring out how one *can* act. So at each step in the logical structure of ethics we must inductively relate the kinds of things people need to the kinds of things they are able to do.

Biologists call the abilities of a goal-directed being its *capacities*. Capacities are potentials for action. For instance, our thumbs allow us to handle objects, a capacity which dolphins, having only fins, do not share; but then, they can hold their breath for extended periods and can swim like the devil.

Our capacities determine the kinds of actions we must take to obtain values. Because man is not endowed with a warm fur coat, but is endowed with a reasoning mind and dexterous fingers, if he is to survive in cold climes he must craft warm clothing against the weather. In a moral context, it is our capacities, in relation to the values they help us acquire, that determine what patterns of action are virtues.

Like values, needs and capacities only exist in relation to some particular organism. "Man" as such, does not have needs, because in reality there are only individual people, each different from the other. When we speak of "the needs and capacities of man," we are making an inductive generalization about the members of our species. Similarly, when Ayn Rand spoke of the "standard" of ethics as "Man's survival-qua-man" she was speaking abstractly of the needs and capacities that we all share.²¹ Of course, individual members of a biological species are not identical: they are not literally the same. For example, person A may need an intense relationship with one other person in order to achieve visibility; person B may need a range of varied relationships with diverse people. What is common is the need for visibility in some form, and that is the level of abstraction at which we speak of visibility as a moral value. The same pattern applies to capacities. Two people may differ in the nature and degree of productive achievement of which they are capable, but all normal people are capable of producing in some form, to some degree, and this is the level of abstraction at which we speak of productiveness as a moral virtue. It is logically precise, then, to say that man has such needs, and in as much as we all possess needs and capacities within the relevant range, it is accurate to speak of *our* needs and capacities.

Morality is a code of principles to guide human action: it is universal. Its principles can only be true when the facts of each of our individual lives actually provide evidence for them. And the principles must address a relevant level of generality. It is proper to say that man needs food, but wrong to say that, because you find chili peppers tasty, we should all enjoy them, despite our great differences in palate and preference.

With the analysis of needs and capacities in hand, we have a pattern of reasoning in ethics that goes as follows:

- X is something we need: X is value
- Y is an action²² that will achieve a value: Y is virtue.

There is a strict order of fundamentality here: values come first, and virtues are determined by their service in achieving values. Virtue is a means to obtaining values. Therefore, when we judge a course of action, we do so by looking for the effect it has. An action can be virtuous if, and only if, it tends to have the consequence of fulfilling a need.

A virtue must help one obtain or protect some value. But the fact that an act obtains one particular value does not necessarily mean it is a virtue. Money is a value, for example, and one can sometimes get some money by stealing. But stealing does not merely get one money; it has many harmful effects, not least of which is that a thief stands in danger of arrest or of falling in with violent, untrustworthy compatriots. An act can only be virtuous if its overall tendency is to promote one's life. But, if it is to do so, it must serve in net to gain or defend values.²³ The end does justify the means, but only if we take into account the entire hierarchy of our ends, with life itself as the ultimate end.

Flourishing and Survival

Because the Objectivist approach to ethics is revolutionary, it tends to attract some relatively technical criticism, both sympathetic and hostile. One area of confusion that an advocate of Objectivism is likely to encounter and wonder about is whether survival really can provide the basis for a full, rich ethic. Isn't it, as some critics claim, too narrow and confining? The rest of this book is, in part, an answer to that question. But at this point it is worth more closely examining the logical relationship between survival and a "truly human" life.

The concept of a truly human life at issue here is usually based on an ethics on *self-realization*. In this view, the truly human life is one that realizes one's potentialities or capacities: capacities for learning, working, playing, loving, and so on. But since self-realization boils down to the development and

exercise of our capacities, it can never be a fundamental value. Of course it is true there are pleasures to be had from the use of capacities. For instance, much of what we enjoy in playing sports or games is using or challenging our abilities. Often, this pleasure arises because we are making ourselves healthier and stronger, physically or mentally. When we extend a skill, discover depths of endurance we didn't know we had, or overcome a difficult mental challenge, it is usually true that we are exercising capacities that do fulfill our life needs. And of course, it is psychologically satisfying. But at best these values are derivative. A runner may derive useful aerobic conditioning and psychological pleasure from his exercise, but if he has a weak heart or pushes himself beyond his proper limits, he may harm himself. He can't tell, from the mere fact that he is running, whether he is doing himself any good.

In general, exercising a capacity can only be valuable with reference to a need that it serves. And needs are defined by *survival* value. After all, we have capacities for hate, war, laziness, and other harmful activities: on a pure ethic of self-realization, shouldn't one embrace these potentialities as well? The only way to tell is by reference to a more fundamental standard. Although Ayn Rand made it clear that she meant her morality to ensure a rich, fully human life, it is the bare fundamental alternative of survival versus death that stands at the root of all values.

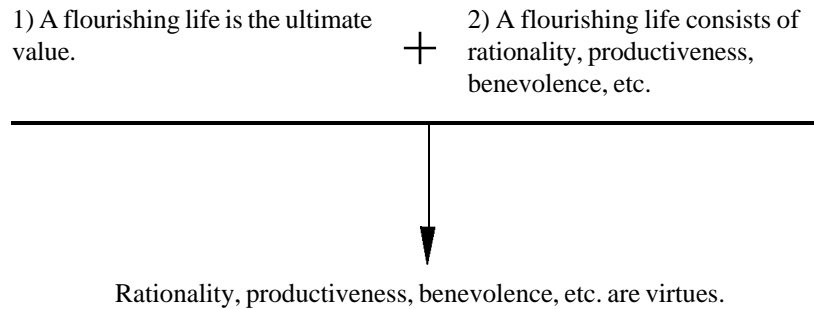
Several admirers of Rand's approach to ethics have debated the sense in which survival can serve the most basic criterion of ethics. Here we have argued that survival is the literal alternative of life versus death, existence versus nonexistence. Others, however, argue that this stark alternative is too restricted a foundation for ethics.²⁴ Instead, they argue that morality should be based on the idea of a good or proper life, also known as a *flourishing* life. Advocates of life-as-flourishing include the potentialities or capacities of man in their idea of human life. For them, a person only truly lives when he is prudent, productive, benevolent, courageous, and so forth. Notice that if a flourishing life were the ultimate value in ethics, we wouldn't have to prove that rationality is a virtue: rationality would be included in our *most basic* idea of the good for man. All of ethics could fit into a diagram that shows one straightforward deduction. Diagram 4 presents such an inference.

Premise 1 states the assumption that **a flourishing life is the ultimate value. Premise 2** adds the rich content assumed in the "flourishing" conception of life: **a flourishing life consists of rationality, productiveness, benevolence, etc.** The **conclusion** summarizes ethics in one fell swoop: **rationality, productiveness, benevolence, etc., are virtues.**

The argument in Diagram 4 would save us a great deal of trouble in explaining the Objectivist ethics, if it were adequate. But it is not adequate, and thus does not form part of the logical structure of Objectivism.

The essential reason for this inadequacy is that, like the ethics of self-

Diagram 2.5: An Illustration of Ethics as if Based on Flourishing



realization it resembles, the content of the Flourishing standard is *arbitrary*. After all, what gets included in the expanded idea of “human life?” Without an established procedure for determining what the good life is, it is hard to tell how one would exclude any kind of commonly observed behavior from “the good life.” For instance, a communitarian may think that man is by nature a political animal. He argues that man needs to be enmeshed in tradition and social rules, and that individual rights are therefore *contrary* to flourishing. How can a classical liberal advocate of life-as-flourishing objectively gainsay that? The communitarian and the classical liberal would end up arguing over the meaning of flourishing, over the *standard* of their supposedly shared ethics. Without a clear, fundamental criterion for determining what is and what is not of value, the flourishing idea of human life becomes a grab-bag of any human goods that one cares to deem essential. And the same is true for virtues: the exercise of any trait that seems desirable or admirable can be incorporated into the conception of the good life without proof that it really is a virtue.

The trouble with making flourishing the basis of ethics is that flourishing is a rich, derivative concept. One can agree with advocates of flourishing who say that we must derive our ethical principles from human nature, based on what is conducive to human well-being, and that we must apply those principles to our own particular circumstances by a process of practical reason.²⁵ Unlike flourishing advocates, however, Objectivism clearly states what it means to base our principles in human nature. Properly understood, a “flourishing” life *is* a good life, but only because the capacities that are exercised in flourishing are *in fact* conducive to survival. This is true throughout the realm of living things. When we speak of plants as flourishing, we mean that they are strong, healthy and capable of living. Health and strength not only stave off death in the moment, but raise the chances of survival into the future. Every life is a span, and

a human life in particular is a long span: capacities that are conducive to survival increase the likelihood that that span will be prolonged.

Critics of the Objectivist position often wonder how such a “narrow” conception of life can justify such values as art or love. Isn’t survival merely a matter of having shelter, health care and the like? What would a painting or a novel have to do with it? We will analyze the value of art in detail in chapter 4. The methodology we use there recognizes that something that contributes to survival does so over the span of one’s whole life. It tends to extend that span, ward off possible harm, or make one more able to confront harm, as does the vitality of a flourishing plant.

One way in which organisms ward off harm is through developing redundant capacities. Many human capacities, for instance, are necessary for our best chance at survival, but are not immediately fatal if lost. In this respect, a person is rather like the Space Shuttle, which carries back-up computers on board. If any one computer fails, a back-up takes over. As long there is still one back-up left, a computer failure doesn’t cause the shuttle to crash, but it does increase the chances of a fatal failure in the future. No one of shuttle’s computers is absolutely necessary to keep it from crashing, but every additional computer decreases the chances of a breakdown. Because human beings are much more complex than space shuttles, the kinds of useful redundancies we need for our best chance at life are more complex, too. It’s a rare soul who would die for lack of a particular piece of art, for instance, but art works help us to understand and integrate our most basic conceptions, and so make us stronger and more resilient mentally. And that helps us to survive.

When it is based on the concept of life, the concept of flourishing does have a role to play in ethics. While survival is a binary condition, success in surviving is not. Anything that decreases the chances of death, that improves the ability of the organism to keep functioning, that extends or prolongs life, fulfills a need. Someone who has been paralyzed in an accident may be *alive* by the criterion of survival, but he is not doing *well* at surviving.²⁶ Critics of the Objectivist position are often insufficiently attentive to this point. Ayn Rand put it this way: “‘survival at any price’... may not last a week or a year.”²⁷

The concept of flourishing is another way of stressing the biocentric basis of the Objectivist ethics: it is a summary way to designate the condition in which one is achieving one’s values through the exercise of one’s virtues. In this respect it clarifies the link we have established between life and happiness. Meeting one’s essential human needs, through the successful exercise of one’s essential human capacities, in each area of life and across the span of one’s life, is the objective condition that produces happiness. The full life is also a happy one. Flourishing cannot substitute for the alternative or life versus death as the basis of ethics, any more than happiness can. When it is grounded in the requirements of survival, however, the concept of flourishing is a valid and useful

conception of successful life. Like happiness, it gives us a summary perspective on what it means to achieve our ultimate value.

As we develop the ethics of Objectivism, we will be establishing the characteristics of a healthy, happy, flourishing human life. To this point, we have examined the logical basis of ethical inquiry; in the next chapter, we will begin to examine the values that are the key to its content: reason and production.

1 Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* 1012.

2 Even if one does not act on a preference, inherent in the nature of a preference is a desire for the thing preferred, a desire that motivates action unless some other motive supersedes it. The impulse to act is part of all conscious preferences, desires, wishes, and emotions. So if one does not intend to act on that impulse, it is meaningless to speak of having a preference. That is why acting for one's values takes center place in Rand's analysis.

3 e.g. William James "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* [1897] in *Pragmatism and Other Essays* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963) 218.

4 Analysis in terms of values or goals is called "teleological explanation" and is pervasive in the biological sciences, for good reason. See Harry Binswanger, *The Biological Basis of Teleological Concepts* (Los Angeles: Ayn Rand Institute Press, 1990) Chapter 1, for a more sophisticated discussion of this point.

5 In technical philosophy, this position is known as "agent-relative value."

6 That organisms *face* alternatives is a subtle and somewhat technical point. It is easy enough to see, in the case of a person, what it means to "face" an alternative. We are conscious of both the external world and ourselves. When we act on our awareness, we do so by choice. But a piece of algae, for example, is a vastly simpler organism. It has no nervous system and thus no center of awareness. Its actions are mechanical: necessitated by its composition and environment. How can such a thing be said to "face" anything?

The answer is that an algae's structure and its reactions are such that it responds in complex but orderly ways to changes in its environment. Its behavior is not random or chaotic: it collects nutrients and rejects harmful substances, gathers energy from sunlight and uses it to gather carbon from the air. It *faces* alternatives in the sense that it reacts to its environment in a manner consistent with achieving these goals. And it is no accident that its goals, its *values*, are all means to preserving its life. Natural selection has shaped it so, because nature "selects," as it were, for one criterion only: viability. See

Binswanger, *The Biological Basis of Teleological Concepts*, for more on these issues from an Objectivist perspective.

- 7 As far as we know, it is also true that only living things are valuers, since no other category of existents are clearly capable of initiating action in the face of alternatives. Perhaps humans will one day devise machines that are sufficiently complex to meet this condition; and perhaps we will one day discover goal-seeking entities elsewhere in the universe. In any case, what matters for the Objectivist ethics is that all living things do seek values, not that they are alone in this capacity
- 8 Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 17.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 10 Those readers with a background in evolutionary biology may balk at the theory that survival is the ultimate value of all living organisms. Evolutionary biology characterizes living action as pursuing “inclusive reproductive fitness,” which is the robustness of a gene pool or species-population. This is a complex technical topic. In this note, we can only comment that the notion of an organism’s life serving, in some sense, the *survival of its genes* seems to misunderstand the process of genetic evolution. The chemicals in our cells that we call “genes” are not a unified entity, but disparate concretes. A “gene” is an abstraction that unites distinct but similar chemicals that are causally related through natural selection, especially their roles in the construction of living organisms. When an organism reproduces, it creates copies of its genetic material: its own genetic material has no life or continued existence distinct from the organism. Whereas a living organism acts to preserve its own existence as an entity, its genes do not: they are merely reproduced by the organism. Therefore, although it is true that natural selection affects the development of successive generations of organisms, through changes in their genes, the chemicals of which the genes are composed are as much subject to this process as are the structures of organisms. Both genetic material and organisms are adapted through natural selection, but only organisms are adapted to act in ways that preserve their continued, concrete existence. See also Binswanger, Chapter IX, especially pages 153-159, for a discussion of how reproduction relates to life as the ultimate value in the case of non-volitional organisms.
- 11 Technically, we choose only some of our actions: we don’t choose to release digestive enzymes, for example. But we can choose all but our most basic actions and even those are open to modification through means we develop and choose to employ. For instance, we can choose to create or buy drugs to suppress our enzymes.
- 12 See for instance the radical decline of French nationalism following the First World War, or of German and Japanese nationalism following the Second World War.

¹³ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” 27.

¹⁴ See e.g. Paul Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan His Life and Legacy*, translated by Thomas Nivison Haining (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) 153. For a recent survey of research on happiness the evinces the complexity of it as a basis for analysis, see e.g. David G. Myers *The Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: Avon, 1992).

¹⁵ Rand. *Atlas Shrugged*, 1022.

¹⁶ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” 29.

¹⁷ If happiness is an aspect of success in living, why, in this analysis, do we treat it a something distinct from life in the most fundamental sense? In technical philosophy, this question is put by asking why we treat values such as reason and happiness as *instrumental* to life when in fact they are *constitutive* of a successful life. Much is made of this distinction in neo-Aristotelean circles. The virtues of that philosophy are supposed to be “constitutive means” of flourishing (i.e. parts of, or aspects of, flourishing), and thus require no other justification.

In contrast Objectivism recognizes that the instrumental/constitutive distinction is not fundamental. Both types of means are means, and must be analyzed similarly. One might express this point by noting that constitutive means are also instrumental. For instance, the heart is part of the body: it is constitutive of the body. But it is easy to show that the heart is simply a means to the body’s functioning: one can observe what happens when the heart fails. In fact, this kind of analysis is essential to identifying constitutive means: a cancerous tumor is also part of the body, but it is *not* a constitutive means to the body’s survival. Similarly, before we accept that happiness is a part of the good life, we must first show that it is a means to the good life or a result of it.

¹⁸ Rand’s portrayal of reason-emotion conflicts often includes a dramatic twist: the subconscious “sense of life” behind a character’s deepest emotions is more true to his values than his sense of life. Dominique Francon, Hank Rearden, and Dagny Taggart are all characters who grow through learning how to harmonize their reason and emotions.

¹⁹ Rand, “Causality versus Duty” in *Philosophy, Who Needs It*, 99.

²⁰ See Rand, “The Ethics of Emergencies,” in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 49-56 for a more detailed discussion.

²¹ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” 25.

²² Technically, virtues such as integrity and honesty are dispositions to act in certain ways. At this point in our discussion, the essential point is that it is the effects of the actions to which a disposition tends, that determine whether or not the disposition is virtuous. We discuss the relation between the disposition and action characterizations of virtue in greater detail in Chapter 5.

²³ Economists and game theorists make a distinction that is very useful in this context. Before an action is taken, we have an “*Ex ante*” expectation of its

chances of success. Once the effects of the action have been realized, we know the “*ex-post*” realization. If chance affects the outcome of an action, then one can act reasonably *ex ante* but still have a bad outcome *ex post*. It sometimes happens that what seems like the best action beforehand works out poorly. One may have decided to fly on one’s latest trip for reasons of safety, air travel being rated safest. And then, unfortunately, the plane crashes: was the act of boarding vicious? No. One has to consider the context in which the choice was made, and what was known then.

We often have to make choices in our lives that have long-term, uncertain consequences. In *Atlas Shrugged* there is a situation similar to one that often happens in life: John Galt falls in love with Dagny Taggart, and his love later leads him to put his life on the line for her. Isn’t there a contradiction here? But love involves a profound commitment to the loved one, and incorporating the loved one into one’s sense of self. Galt didn’t form this bond expecting to have to sacrifice his life: he hoped Dagny would settle in the Valley. *Ex ante* Galt fell in love as part of living a rich and healthy life, expecting love to add to his life. *Ex-post*, an unlikely event caused him to put his life on the line for his love. Unless that event was to be expected, he shouldn’t be seen as putting his life and values in conflict.

²⁴ Two notable Objectivist-sympathizers who are advocates of the flourishing perspective are Douglas Rasmussen and Douglas Den Uyl, most prominently in their ethical treatise *Liberty and Nature (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1991)*. See Tara Smith, *Moral Rights and Political Freedom* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995) e.g. p. 67, for an independent Objectivist-influenced construction of the flourishing argument.

²⁵ For a recent treatment of flourishing, which posits a derivation from human nature, see Douglas B. Rasmussen, “Human Flourishing and the Appeal to Human Nature” *Social Philosophy and Policy Winter 1999 (Bowling Green: Social Philosophy and Policy Center, 1999)*.

²⁶ Of course, the physical loss suffered by a paralytic may well be offset to some degree by the technological products of the human mind, which have allowed many disabled people to earn a living, care for themselves, and compensate in other ways for their incapacities. This does not mean, however, that the loss of capacities does not make a person less robust and able than he otherwise would have been, although it does mean that in today’s economy, physical disability is by no means a fundamental barrier to success and achievement.

²⁷ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” 24.