

Gotthelf, Allan, and James B. Lennox, eds. *Metaethics, Egoism, and Virtue: Studies in Ayn Rand's Normative Theory*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011.

Ayn Rand now counts as a figure in the history of philosophy, and there is ongoing interest in bringing her ideas into conversation with academic philosophy. The collection under review includes a number of conversations amongst philosophers who are interested in Rand not merely as a matter of antiquarian interest, but as a source of ongoing philosophical inspiration. The title reflects a focus on metaethical issues in Rand's own thought, and (potentially) in engagement with contemporary metaethics. Its aim seems to be ambiguous between allowing those committed to Objectivism to work through differences among themselves, and making her thought accessible (and persuasive) to philosophers outside the fold. As one of the latter, I am perhaps not well situated to comment on the success of the volume in the first of these aims. While I am sympathetic with Rand's work as social criticism, whether there are new avenues for addressing contemporary metaethical issues to be found in her work remains to be seen, more because that conversation doesn't quite seem to be fully under way than because Rand's thought has nothing to offer. The impression this collection produces is that there is lots of fertile territory left to be explored.

The volume begins with a discussion between Darryl Wright and Allan Gotthelf concerning what we might call the foundations of practical reason. How do we come to have reason to do some things rather than others, on Rand's view? Wright's Randian account maintains that all reasons to act are in virtue of an "ultimate end" (p. 3). What are we to say about this end, and the rationality of having it? Rand disdains the Humean view that ends are determined by passions. Instead, "we desire what we value," and values depend on the judgments of one's mind (p. 5). Rand also dismisses the idea that values are rational in virtue of being of either "intrinsic" value or (per Kant) some sort of constitutive feature of rational agency (p. 6). This is because such conceptions of value seem to divorce value from benefit (though we might wonder what benefit is, if not some form of value). Rand's idea is that values are grounded in teleology: in the goals and purposes of living organisms. Life is the ultimate value.

It appears that Objectivism faces a kind of dilemma here, familiar from Plato's *Euthyphro*. Rand's view of value begins with a choice to live: Wright says humans face a "basic alternative" of whether to continue or discontinue their lives (p. 24). From that choice come all their reasons for acting. But do we have reason to make that choice? Or do we have reasons only in virtue of having made it? Is our choice a response to value (perhaps to

the value of life) that is there independently of our choice? Or does our choice to live bring value into being, where otherwise there would be none?

Wright and Gotthelf agree that Rand rejects the first of these alternatives as “intrinsicism.” Gotthelf’s essay is a response to an earlier article by Douglas Rasmussen in which he makes the case that only the first alternative would avoid making that basic choice “arbitrary”—an “irrational or arrational commitment” (quoted p. 34). Gotthelf maintains that Rasmussen’s position is inconsistent with several Objectivist doctrines, and that resisting it by (in effect) taking the second horn of our dilemma does not commit one to thinking that the choice of life is “optional” or “arbitrary.” Wright too is committed to resisting Rasmussen’s interpretation, though he aspires to offer a “third alternative” (p. 30). But it is not clear how Gotthelf can avoid the conclusion that choosing to live, as we make that choice, is arbitrary, and it is also not clear that there really is a third way on offer.

Why is the basic choice not “arbitrary” (p. 43)? Gotthelf answers this question retrospectively. Once life is chosen, we endorse it in a way that gives us “all the reason in the world” to see that choice as non-arbitrary. However, at the moment of choice, it does seem to be arbitrary. It is neither causally nor “morally” necessitated. (It is not clear whether on Objectivism there might be something further to being rationally necessitated.) If the choice is truly “not justified by anything prior” (p. 43), then it would indeed seem to be arbitrary in a crucial sense. This is so even if (as Gotthelf argues) it is not “optional.” Here is a missed opportunity to explore the possibilities of voluntarism, a point of tangency with contemporary metaethical thought. Engagement with, for example, the voluntarism in Christine Korsgaard’s neo-Kantian metaethics could be enlightening.<sup>1</sup>

Nor does Wright’s “third alternative” fare better. Wright rejects Rasmussen’s interpretation as indistinguishable from intrinsicism (p. 30). How is his view supposed to differ both from intrinsicism and from the voluntarism on offer from Gotthelf? The “third way” appears to rest on Wright’s claim that there are “non-deliberative grounds” for the basic choice (pp. 28 and 32), but it’s not clear what this might mean. The example he draws from Rand’s *The Virtue of Selfishness* is that of experiencing life as a value (p. 28). But this seems to fall on the “discovery” side of the *Euthyphro* dilemma: that life has value is what explains why we are able to experience it that way. It would appear to have that value prior to and independent of choice. Wright is plainly not happy with that implication, as he writes of one “choosing to live while already engaged in that process.” This, he says, amounts to a “ratification” of a “commitment to a value” that “one has already to some extent embraced in a less reflective way” (p. 32). But at this point we are far from the idea of “basic choice” or a “basic alternative.” We are already living lives with some degree anyway of organic success, so the choice in

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Christine Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. Korsgaard’s exchange with G. A. Cohen in that volume.

question does not seem to be one of existence or the lack of it, but rather what form that existence should take. That's a perfectly intelligible idea: in fact, it is the very idea animating ancient Greek ethics, from Socrates forward,<sup>2</sup> and it brings with it its own Euthyphro-like problems.<sup>3</sup> But Wright does not admit that this third way really takes us beyond a basic choice to live, to a decision about how to live.

The second set of essays is an exchange between Irfan Khawaja and Paul Bloomfield over the distinctiveness of Objectivist ethics and moral epistemology. Khawaja positions his essay as addressing the "foundations of ethics." One problem with approaching the topic in this way is that questions about such foundations might be any of a variety of questions: perhaps something like questions about normative foundations, or "grounds," or the like, of the sort H. A. Prichard notoriously addressed.<sup>4</sup> Or they might be epistemic foundations: grounds for moral belief. However, it is not agreed by all hands that our relationship with morality is one of belief, as opposed to other kinds of attitudes. (Expressivists, for example, resist the idea that belief is what morality is about.) Finally, "foundations" might invoke some sort of hybrid question, in which we are trying to make sense of our moral beliefs and experience, at least in part in hopes of shaping our future actions. Perhaps Rand's question, "Why does a man need a code of values?" (quoted p. 61) might naturally be given this interpretation. These are really different projects; answers to one may well not work as answers for the others, but Khawaja treats the epistemic question as a "master" question. Thus his offer of a perceptual model of epistemic foundations (p. 63) fails to engage lots of questions about "foundations" that moral theorists want to ask.<sup>5</sup>

But understanding Rand's question of why we need ethics outruns Khawaja's approach to the topic in other ways. If we are asking "why" questions, we are asking for reasons. If we are in the business of exchanging reasons, we are already engaged in a normative practice; we are already considerably beyond the point at which a "basic choice" of survival or its opposite is at stake (as Wright points out). And the fact that we will die if we do not undertake action to live is simply a natural fact. It is, as Derek Parfit

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<sup>2</sup> See Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), esp. Chap. 1.

<sup>3</sup> I discuss some of these dilemmas in Mark LeBar, *The Value of Living Well* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), Chap. 11.

<sup>4</sup> H. A. Prichard, "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?" *Mind* 21 (1912), pp. 21-37.

<sup>5</sup> How perception fits with a "concept-based" view of Objectivism (p. 65) is another question. We don't perceive norms for concept-formation, but I leave aside this question.

would put it,<sup>6</sup> normatively significant, but not in itself normative—at least it is not obvious that or how it is itself normative. If there is in Objectivism an explanation for how such undoubted causal facts themselves constitute norms, that would indeed be a useful idea to bring to the conversation. But simply pointing out the causal upshots of our conduct isn't enough; that will help only to see causal implications for commitments we have already undertaken.

In his response essay, Paul Bloomfield (speaking from the perspective of analytic metaethics) notices these elided methodological and substantive questions in Khawaja's account (p. 78). However, he makes a positive argument that there are continuities between Rand's metaethics and a number of other strains in contemporary metaethics. This is particularly true of the eudaimonist tradition, into which (he says) Rand's normative views "fit just fine" (p. 83). For reasons I have indicated, and others,<sup>7</sup> I am somewhat more skeptical on that point than is Bloomfield; it is a further question whether in the end the aim of Khawaja's work (and that of other contributors) is fit or something more like reformation.

The third pair of essays addresses the nature of Rand's egoism, and in particular its relationship to virtue. Christine Swanton argues that that relationship can be illuminated by considering the same relationship in Friedrich Nietzsche. The prompt for her discussion is Tara Smith's account of Rand as a virtue theorist.<sup>8</sup> A crucial question is what sort of reason-giving force the interests of others have for the virtuous. It is possible to have a version of "virtuous egoism" on which one's own interests come to repose (in part) in the interests of others, and that opens the space for those interests to count within a straightforwardly egoistic view. Does Rand countenance this possibility? To answer this, we must understand the relationship between value and virtue. Is virtue capable of bestowing value (so to speak) on its own? Or may we understand virtue only as in the service of value independently understood and constituted? Swanton suggests that there is a case for the first claim, that (like Nietzsche) Rand can maintain that it is in one's interests to cultivate a wide conception of those whose interests we have a stake in (pp. 98-99). Since this means we can have reason to benefit others through virtuous action, we might be justified in ascribing to Rand a conception even of virtuous altruism (p. 91).

In response, Darryl Wright agrees that to get at Rand's egoism it is crucial to understand the value of other people, and along with it the notion of "sacrifice" that her account can countenance. Objectivism does not

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<sup>6</sup> Derek Parfit, "Reasons and Motivation," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Vol. 71 (1997), p. 124.

<sup>7</sup> I make a number of these points in my "Book Review of Tara Smith's *Viable Values*," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 35 (2001), pp. 575-79.

<sup>8</sup> Tara Smith, *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

countenance a “strong” conception of sacrifice (one which involves acting against an agent’s own rational hierarchy of values; p. 104). But a “weak” sense of sacrifice (acting against an irrational hierarchy of values) could make sense, since there would be some sort of rational justification for giving up one’s values for those with improper values and judgment (p. 105). Wright also concurs that virtue is not purely in the service of values—it may sometimes justify action in its own right (p. 109). However, Wright denies that there is any substantial notion of altruism which can rightly be attributed to Rand.

The last six essays in the volume are in effect a symposium on Tara Smith’s 2006 book on Rand and virtue. Helen Cullyer follows Swanton in putting pressure on Rand’s egoism as Smith understands it. As Smith has it, on Rand’s view we are “predominantly contractual traders” (p. 120), but Cullyer argues that this is implausible as an account of our social nature. If instead we recognize the “multiplicity of social relationships” that we see contributing to our flourishing, we end up with a very different notion of self-interest from the “rational maximizer” one might expect to emerge from Objectivism (p. 123). Cullyer even suggests that Smith’s understanding of Rand induces a notion of respect for rights as a “common interest,” an “impersonal good” (p. 122). Whether or not this is a helpful conception of rights (I believe it is not), at this point the “virtue” in “virtuous egoism” would seemingly have led us a long way from the Objectivist root.

Indeed, this is precisely the point at which Smith pushes back in her response, arguing that Cullyer’s reading takes as oppositional the “common” interest and my own. Instead, self-interest has a crucial kind of priority to the common interest: “this particular ‘our,’ I come to realize, is the best way of promoting ‘my’” (p. 127). Smith also rejects the idea that rights are a matter of impersonal good, rather than instrumentalities toward advancement of self-interest.

Christine Swanton’s discussion piece returns to the issue of the relationships between virtue, value, and sacrifice. In particular, she argues, we must take account of the work of virtue in determining what forms of sacrifice Rand does, and does not, countenance, and we must also recognize virtue’s not merely instrumental contribution to value (p. 135). It is not mere survival that is the basic value of Objectivism, but survival in a mode proper to human beings. That introduces an essentially normative element into Rand’s thought, and that normative role is filled out by virtue. But (in an echo of her earlier argument) she maintains that the other-regarding dimension of virtue on Objectivism is ultimately too narrow.

Smith’s reply is that value must have priority, and that “virtue depends on value” (p. 145). Virtues are what they are solely in virtue of their service to an agent’s objective interests. This instrumental view of virtue sustains the priority of value, but it seems to have an oddly contingent result. Instrumental relationships are causal and probabilistic. It would seem that one is merely not playing the odds correctly by failing to be virtuous. If the likes of Wesley Mouch, the consummate parasite of *Atlas Shrugged*, can survive

and thrive without Objectivist virtue, what is the argument against parasitism? If the reply is that, while he is surviving organically, he is failing to thrive in the way proper to humans, that would seem to return us directly to Swanton's concern that we must first identify what normative content constrains survival, rather than expecting that content to be supplied by survival or self-interest.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, Lester Hunt presses on Smith's characterization of virtue in Objectivism in a different way, arguing that it much more closely resembles Aristotle's conception of virtue as a matter of character. Part of the point of Hunt's critique is that it is easy to overemphasize what we might call occurrent control, versus a kind of diachronic control, over what we do. While it is true that, as Smith argues, "feelings are not under a person's direct control" (quoted on p. 155), what we are capable of at any given time is to a significant extent the product of our past choices (p. 156). That permits us to have a broader conception of what it is that we may be credited or blamed for.

In reply, Smith pushes back on degree of control: "But it is not the case that a person chooses all his beliefs and values as a mature, fully informed and rationally capable adult, such that any 'wayward' emotions he experiences are proof of moral failings" (p. 160). Her argument against virtue as a trait of character, it seems, depends on the claim that Objectivist ideals are aesthetic, as well as moral. However, this is no kind of objection to an Aristotelian conception of virtue, which is aesthetic as well as moral. *To kalon*, which is the object of action for Aristotle's virtuous person, is "the fine or noble"—fully aesthetic and fully ethical. So in the end I am not sure what disagreement there is here.

Overall, this volume takes up a wide variety of metaethical issues that are important both for those who look to Rand for inspiration and those who do not. One can hope the conversation continues, for mutual benefit.

Mark LeBar  
Ohio University

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<sup>9</sup> I make a similar point in LeBar, "Book Review of Tara Smith's *Viable Values*."

