

Afterword

Randian Egoism: Time to Get High

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On the first page of his book *On Ayn Rand*, the late Allan Gotthelf writes:

It is high time that academic philosophers accept the responsibility of understanding, thoroughly and with full, professional expertise, this highly original thinker and the scope and content of her often groundbreaking thought.¹

This seems a fairly reasonable demand, even if it happens to be one more often ignored in the breach than in the observance.

One common breach is the practice, in anthologies intended for philosophy students, of including a critique of Ayn Rand without a corresponding text of hers to read. The pedagogical assumption here seems to be that it's crucial for students to see Rand attacked in print, but not nearly as important to read what she wrote. The more general methodological assumption seems to be that one needn't read an author to be in a position to read and accept a critique of her views. What matters is the spectacle of an attack on the object of the critique, not critical engagement with claims actually made by her. The Objectivist habit of attacking Immanuel Kant without reading him is well-known, and justly criticized, but somehow, the same habit, applied to Rand, is still thought acceptable. At any rate, the ubiquity of the technique hasn't stopped academic critics of Rand from suggesting that *they* are the real philosophers while Rand and her sympathizers are amateurs or crackpots.² Given this, it's worth subjecting the

¹ Allan Gotthelf, *On Ayn Rand* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000), p. 1.

² For typical examples, see, e.g., Robert Nozick, "On the Randian Argument," in *Socratic Puzzles* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 249-64; Mary Midgely, *Can't We Make Moral Judgements?* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991), pp. 98,

methodological and editorial principles of the “real philosophers” to some scrutiny. Academic philosophers take a certain pride in the “rigor” of academic philosophy as currently practiced. Does that rigor—we might ask—extend to the discussion of Ayn Rand?

A full answer to that question would fill the pages of a good-sized book. For present purposes, consider just one representative example, the anthologies and textbooks marketed in the fall 2013 Oxford University Press Higher Education Group’s “Books for Courses” catalogue. What strikes the prospective textbook consumer—or ought to—is the notable vacuity of academic discussions of Ayn Rand in the textbooks advertised there. And in this case, “vacuity” turns out not to be a sarcastic metaphor, but the literal truth.

Turn to page 3 of the catalogue, and you’ll find Louis Pojman and Lewis Vaughn’s *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth*, whose section VI is devoted to ethics.³ Under section VI.B, there are three readings on egoism, as follows:

- Plato, Why Should I Be Moral? Gyges’s Ring and Socrates’ Dilemma⁴
- Louis P. Pojman, Egoism and Altruism: A Critique of Ayn Rand
- Joel Feinberg, Psychological Egoism

Why a critique *of* Ayn Rand, but no reading *by* Ayn Rand? That doesn’t look much like a “quest for truth.” It looks like a quest for indoctrination.

119-22, 153, and 160; James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill College, 1999), p. 86; Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), chap. 3; Jason Brennan, *Libertarianism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 21; Carlin Romano, *America the Philosophical* (New York: Knopf, 2012), pp. 359-66.

For a good critique of Nozick, see Douglas Den Uyl and Douglas Rasmussen, “Nozick on the Randian Argument,” in *Reading Nozick: Essays on Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, ed. Jeffrey Paul (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1981), chap. 12; for a good critique of Midgely, see Robert Campbell, “When Avoiding Scholarship Is the Academic Thing to Do: Mary Midgely’s Misinterpretation of Ayn Rand,” *Reason Papers* 21 (1996), pp. 53-60; for a good critique of Romano, see Stephen Hicks, “*America the Philosophical*: Carlin Romano on Ayn Rand,” *Reason Papers* 34, no. 2 (October 2012), pp. 245-47.

³ Louis Pojman and Lewis Vaughn, *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴ Despite the often exorbitant prices of their textbooks, Oxford University Press’s textbooks often seem dotted with editorial inconsistencies that persist, edition after edition. Is there a grammatical explanation for why the possessive Gyges gets an added ‘s,’ but the possessive Socrates does not?

On page 6 of the catalogue, we find Lewis Vaughn's *Great Philosophical Arguments: An Introduction to Philosophy*.⁵ Chapter 6 is on Ethics, and section 21 is "Argument Against Ethical Egoism." Here are the selections:

- Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*
- Louis P. Pojman, *A Critique of Ethical Egoism*
- Joel Feinberg, *Psychological Egoism*

The formula looks familiar. The ostensible aim is to cover ethical egoism. Apparently, though, there's no need to consider arguments *for* egoism before asking students to consider arguments *against* it, since the underlying aim is not precisely to discuss, but to discredit the doctrine from the outset. To that end, Vaughn opens with a classic text designed to introduce students to Hobbes's explicitly predatory conception of egoism,⁶ priming the student to regard human self-interest as constituted by innate propensities to dominate others and commandeer their lives and property. The excerpt from Hobbes sets the stage for Pojman's critique of Rand, which depicts Rand's conception of self-interest (inaccurately, and without significant textual analysis either of Hobbes or of Rand) as though it were somehow continuous with Hobbes's. The reader is vaguely left to believe that the "Hobbes-Rand" view has somehow been refuted. We then cap off the section by attacking psychological egoism via Feinberg's essay, despite its total disengagement with Hobbes's arguments, and its total irrelevance either to Rand or to ethical egoism. The result is an essentially incoherent attempt to cover ethical egoism, one practically calculated to leave the student with a vague sense of revulsion for and confusion about the doctrine, but with no way of figuring out what it actually says.

A similar analysis applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the use of Plato's *Republic* in the preceding textbook. The argument "for" ethical egoism is conflated with an argument for predation, and comes from Plato's character Thrasymachus. The Thrasymachean conception of egoism is then to be conflated with whatever Rand was supposed to have said about it, with no indication of what she in fact did say. Ultimately, it doesn't really seem to matter what Rand said. What matters is that the student should internalize the inference from egoism to the pursuit of self-interest, and from the pursuit of self-interest to the desire for predation. The latter inference, derived from the

⁵ Lewis Vaughn, *Great Philosophical Arguments: An Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶ An added complication: Hobbes's *Leviathan* is, if anything, a defense of psychological, not ethical egoism. So the textbook's section on "ethical egoism" consists of three readings, two of them off-topic.

authority of Thrasymachus and/or Hobbes, is to function as an axiom from which all other inferences are to be made on the subject.

The absence of Randian texts from textbooks like the preceding absolves the reader of the need to ask questions like the following:

1. Why does Socrates accept the challenge of offering an egoistic defense of justice in the *Republic* on what seem (and have often taken by scholars to be) egoistic terms?⁷ Why would Socrates have regarded success at that project as success in the first place? What, incidentally, is going on in *Republic IX*, and how does it connect with *Republic I*? How, in general, does Socrates's ethical project in the *Republic* connect with Rand's?
2. Is predatory egoism the *only* species of egoism? What other species might there be? Does it make logical sense to regard predatory and non-predatory forms of egoism as species of a common genus?
3. To what extent do Rand's and (say) Hobbes's egoisms overlap? To what extent don't they? Does it ultimately make sense to regard Rand's egoism as a species or instance of Hobbes's, or is it a conception of a fundamentally different kind?
4. What, in fact, did Rand *say* about egoism in her own words? A look at the relevant texts suggests that she said things that don't cohere very easily with a predatory conception of egoism. For example:

⁷ Philosophers have, for the better part of a century, taken Socrates to be offering an egoistic defense of justice in the *Republic*, objecting often enough to its egoistic character. This egoistic interpretation of Plato's *Republic* goes back at least as far as Sidgwick's discussion in *The Methods of Ethics*, as well as to Prichard's famous discussion in "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?" (See Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981], II.5.4, pp. 170-72, and H. A. Prichard, *Moral Writings*, ed. Jim MacAdam [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002], chap. 2.) For more recent discussions, see Philippa Foot, "Moral Beliefs," in Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), chap. 8, and Bernard Boxill, "How Injustice Pays," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 9, no. 4 (Summer 1980), pp. 359-71.

For more narrowly scholarly discussion of Socratic egoism, see Terence Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 53-55, 117, 189-91, 210-12, 243-48, 250-51, and 254-59; Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 315-20; C. D. C. Reeve, *Philosopher-Kings: The Argument of Plato's Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 269-70; and Richard Kraut, "The Defense of Justice in Plato's *Republic*," in *Plato's Republic: Critical Essays*, ed. Richard Kraut (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), pp. 197-222.

Despite the size of the literature on the egoistic character of Plato's argument, introductory textbooks persist in claiming that Socrates's rejection of Thrasymachus's argument entails a rejection of egoism *tout court*.

- that moral virtue is “the means to and realization of” moral value⁸;
- that the pursuit of moral value leads to a harmony of interests among virtuously egoistic agents⁹;
- that honesty, integrity, and justice are all moral virtues, and all in one’s egoistic interest¹⁰;
- that honesty forbids deception of self or others¹¹;
- that integrity requires that we take responsibility for the consequences of our actions¹²;
- that justice demands respect for rights, and proscribes first uses of force¹³;
- that justice requires us to treat others as ends, and never merely as means to our ends¹⁴;
- that justice requires us to treat others as “independent equals” in “free, voluntary, unforced, [and] uncoerced exchange”¹⁵;
- that justice demands that we “seek only what we earn by our own efforts, rather than switching to others the burden of our failures”¹⁶;
- that justice demands promise-keeping and forbids promise-breaking¹⁷;
- that hedonistic and preference-satisfactionist accounts of well-being are false¹⁸;

⁸ Ayn Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet, 1961), p. 27.

⁹ Ayn Rand, “The ‘Conflicts’ of Men’s Interest,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 57-65.

¹⁰ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” p. 28.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ayn Rand, “Causality Versus Duty,” in Ayn Rand, *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, Centennial ed. (New York: New American Library, 1982), p. 136.

¹⁸ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” pp. 31-34.

- that one should volunteer to help strangers in an emergency.¹⁹

It follows that either Rand was inconsistent about predation, or she was offering a consistent but fundamentally non-predatory ethic. One would think that competent teachers would give their students the task of figuring out which disjunct of the preceding disjunction actually obtains, and emphasize that the task in question requires *reading* the relevant texts.²⁰

5. Suppose, purely *ex hypothesi*, that Rand was right to think that the interests of rational agents harmonize when those agents are acting rationally.²¹ Setting aside the truth or *prima facie* plausibility of this claim, how would its truth change the nature of the debate about egoism, or about ethics generally? In other words, what does the thesis assert, presuppose, or entail?

¹⁹ Rand, “The Ethics of Emergencies,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 50-56.

²⁰ Pojman insists that according to Rand, “where it is in our interest to harm another person, it is our duty to do so” (Louis Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, 4th ed. [Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002], p. 92). Again, according to Pojman, Rand advises us “to love ourselves first even if it means hurting others” (*Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, p. 82). And again: “Ayn Rand’s famous defense of the virtue of selfishness . . . holds that everyone ought to do what will maximize one’s own expected personal utility or bring about one’s own happiness, even when it means harming other people” (Louis Pojman, *The Moral Life: An Introductory Reader in Ethics and Literature* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], p. 540).

Pojman seems to have generated this interpretation of Rand from whole cloth. In fact, justified self-defense aside, what Rand thought distinctive about her conception of self-interest was that its pursuit *didn’t* require harm to others: “The idea that man’s self-interest can be served only by a non-sacrificial relationship with others has never occurred to those humanitarian apostles of unselfishness, who proclaim their desire to achieve the brotherhood of men” (“The Objectivist Ethics,” p. 34). In any case, Rand’s ethics is not a maximizing conception, and makes no use of the idea of expected utility.

²¹ Rand, “The ‘Conflicts’ of Men’s Interests,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*.

In a discussion of egoism that doesn’t explicitly mention Rand, Richard Burnor and Yvonne Raley describe egoism as a “prejudicial” view on the grounds that it defines “the good and the right prejudicially—in terms of what produces desirable consequences for certain individuals but not for others” (Richard Burnor and Yvonne Raley, *Ethical Choices: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy with Cases* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], p. 94). But since no moral agent can, in each action, produce desirable consequences for every possible beneficiary—remote, proximate, present, future, plant, animal, human—every theory is “prejudicial” in this way, so that the objection loses its force. In describing egoism as “prejudicial,” Burnor and Raley themselves seem to be prejudging the issue of egoism’s compatibility with moral impartiality, overlooking the possibility that an egoist might take it to be in his self-interest to be objective or impartial in moral judgment, as Rand explicitly did (see, among others, essays 8 and 9 in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*).

If introductory philosophy students aren't asking questions like these while thinking about Ayn Rand's ethical views, they aren't really thinking about her views at all. And if textbook editors don't induce students to ask these questions—and they usually don't—they aren't inducing students to do any thinking.

Moving to page 9 of the catalogue, we encounter Louis Pojman and James Fieser's *Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, fourth edition.²² Section VI is "Moral Philosophy." Section VI.B is "Morality and Self-Interest." Here are the readings:

- Plato, Gyges's Ring, or Is the Good Good for You?
- James Rachels, Ethical Egoism
- J. L. Mackie, The Law of the Jungle: Moral Alternatives and Principles of Evolution

It's the same variation on the same cookbook formula: classic text, followed by critique of Rand, followed by a discussion of psychological egoism—in this case, a sympathetic but highly indirect discussion via evolutionary psychology. As usual, the Rachels reading is included as an explicit critique of Rand, and as usual, the textbook contains no reading by Rand. Apparently, the introductory philosophy student need not read Rand to evaluate the cogency of Rachels's critique; he or she need only take for granted that whatever Rachels the Respectable Philosopher said about Rand must be true. Evidently, one can't expect a selection by Rand in a 704 page textbook containing a critique of Rand, and sold at the selfless price of \$89.95.

Turning to page 23 of the Oxford catalogue, we get to Steven Cahn's *Exploring Ethics: An Introductory Anthology*.²³ Part I consists of "Challenges to Morality," and reading 9 is James Rachels, "Egoism and Moral Scepticism," another explicit critique of Rand. No, there's no reading by Rand in this book, either. One wouldn't want to take the book's title too literally.

Could the problem be that Rand's texts are (or have at times been) unavailable for inclusion in anthologies? Rand's writings are, after all, controlled by the executors of Rand's estate, and the executors of her estate—like the executors of many literary estates—often make idiosyncratically proprietary decisions about what writings they will release for publication on a given occasion, to whom, and on what conditions. Perhaps they simply refused to make Rand's texts available for publication, or perhaps the

²² Louis Pojman and James Fieser, *Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²³ Steven Cahn, *Exploring Ethics: An Introductory Anthology*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

conditions they imposed on editors were too steep to have justified inclusion in a given anthology.²⁴

Fair enough, but if so, it seems to me that an editor would be obliged to forgo discussion of Rand altogether. There's no shortage of ethical views to include in an anthology, and no editorial imperative that demands that Rand's views must be discussed in every anthology, or in any given one. As a general principle, if an editor can't get decent coverage of a given topic in an anthology, he or she ought to have the integrity not to try to cover the topic at all. An editor who defaults on this obligation in an anthology supposedly devoted to ethics is doing something morally problematic. The irony here is that the problematic thing he or she is doing is depicted by analogy in Rand's novel, *The Fountainhead*. My suggestion to an editor tempted to compromise his or her editorial integrity in order to sell more ethics textbooks would be to read that novel with attention to the characters in it who sacrifice moral to monetary value, a topic on which Rand was a great deal more insightful than is generally acknowledged. Yes, textbook companies have to make money, but to paraphrase a famous philosopher, man does not live by royalty checks alone.

In any case, it's highly doubtful that Rand's texts are *currently* unavailable for inclusion in anthologies. If anything, the executors of Rand's estate—and the bureaucratic apparatus surrounding the Ayn Rand Institute and its various affiliates and front organizations—seem overly eager for academic respectability, willing to stretch (or shrink) the truth in any number of directions in order to attract the academic attention they so eagerly crave.²⁵

The Oxford catalogue itself seems to confirm the supposition that Rand's texts are at least nowadays available enough.²⁶ Justin McBrayer and

²⁴ Pojman, for instance, complains in the 2000 edition of *The Moral Life*, p. 540: "It should be noted that the Ayn Rand Institute refused permission to reprint portions from Rand's work." And yet three years earlier, Christina Hoff Sommers and Fred Sommers's *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life* had included an excerpt from Rand's *The Virtue of Selfishness* (along with Pojman's and Rachels's critiques of it). See Christina Hoff Sommers and Fred Sommers, *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life: Introductory Readings in Ethics*, 4th ed. (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1997), pp. 492-95. Ultimately, the evidence is too opaque to justify anything but speculations.

²⁵ I've documented this in a series of blog posts at the website of the (now-defunct) Institute for Objectivist Studies, accessed online at: <http://instituteforobjectiviststudies.wordpress.com>. Search for any or all of the following: "Allan Gotthelf," "Anthem Foundation," "Ayn Rand Institute," "David Kelley," "Don Watkins," "Geoffrey Sayre-McCord," "Harry Binswanger," "John McCaskey," "Leonard Peikoff," "libertarianism," "Peter Schwartz."

²⁶ Other examples: the tenth edition of Joel Feinberg and Russell Shafer-Landau's *Reason and Responsibility* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1998) included Rand's "The Ethics of Emergencies," but more recent editions of the textbook, e.g., the fifteenth (2013), do not. Similarly, the fourth edition of Mark Timmons's *Conduct and Character* included Rand, along with Rachels's critique (Mark Timmons, *Conduct and*

Peter Markie's *Introducing Ethics* contains a selection by Ayn Rand, "The Virtue of Selfishness," followed (of course) by Rachels's critique of it.²⁷ The fifth edition of Pojman's *The Moral Life: An Introductory Reader in Ethics and Literature* has "Ayn Rand, In Defense of Ethical Egoism," followed for good measure, by Pojman's and Rachels's critiques.²⁸ Why both? The tag-team effort seems to bespeak a kind of editorial anxiety: having allowed Rand to make a *pro forma* appearance in the book, the editor seems to fear the possibility that the naive reader might end up agreeing with her. To forestall that possibility, such readers are offered two critiques in response to Rand's single essay. It's interesting to speculate what inferences would be drawn about an anthology that did just the reverse, reprinting one essay of Rand's, followed by a critique of her views, followed by a final selection that gave Rand's views the last word in the debate. Would such an anthology open itself up to charges of being biased in favor of Rand? I don't know the answer, because, despite twenty years in the profession, I've never seen such an anthology and don't expect to.

It's interesting that editors who anthologize Rand typically insist on excerpting Rand's views on *egoism* (or somewhat less typically, on capitalism), and rarely on anything else. The reader might be forgiven for not having inferred that she wrote on other topics, but she did. She had interesting (and provocative, though occasionally fatuous) things to say about many things—the ethics of emergencies,²⁹ moral compromise, moral judgment,

Character: Readings in Moral Theory [Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002], pp. 20-24), but the most recent fifth (2006) and sixth (2011) editions do not. Competent textbook treatments of Rand include Nina Rosenstand's *The Moral of the Story: An Introduction to Ethics*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006), and Judith Boss's *Analyzing Moral Issues* (New York: McGraw Hill Humanities, 2012).

²⁷ Justin McBrayer and Peter Markie, *Introducing Ethics: A Critical Thinking Approach with Readings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁸ Louis Pojman and Lewis Vaughn, *The Moral Life: An Introductory Reader in Ethics and Literature*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁹ A Philosopher's Index search for the term "emergency" that I did in February 2014 yielded 385 entries. The chronologically first entry on the list is Robert Murphy, "A Suicidal Emergency," *Journal of Existentialism* 2 (Fall 1961), pp. 133-46, which discusses a topic much narrower than emergencies per se. The chronologically second entry on the list is Rand's 1963 essay "The Ethics of Emergencies"—the first entry on the list to discuss the concept of an emergency in entirely general terms, and the first to discuss in equally general terms the idea of an ethics appropriate to emergencies. To find a philosophical discussion of emergencies or emergency ethics of equal generality, we have to jump forward more than a decade to Larry Wright's "Emergency Behavior," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 17, nos. 1-4 (1974), pp. 43-47.

Beginning in the 1970s, there is increasing emphasis in the philosophical literature on ethical dilemmas that arise in emergency *rooms*, and with the publication

integrity, racism, envy, the ethics of discourse, behaviorism, and censorship, all of them topics ripe for inclusion in an anthology containing a “diverse” collection of views on ethics. Granted, doing so might well necessitate commissioning an appropriately large selection of extremely critical essays attacking her claims, but perhaps that’s the price one pays for anthologies that improve on current offerings.

Perhaps we should re-formulate Gotthelf’s demand quoted at the outset of this article to make it sound a bit more prosaic, less ardently homiletic, and less hagiographical. How’s this?

It is high time that those academic philosophers who insist on criticizing Rand accept the responsibility of reading and understanding her writings before doing so, and cultivate the same attitude, toward Rand and others, in their students and readers.

Is it really such an unreasonable demand, at least phrased in this modest way? By contrast with Gotthelf’s own formulation, the preceding one doesn’t imply that everyone *has* to be interested in Ayn Rand, any more than everyone *has* to be interested in Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Hannah Arendt, Ludwig Wittgenstein, or Murray Rothbard. It does seem, however, that if you insist on *critiquing* someone, be it Rand or Heidegger, etc., you should be sufficiently interested in her writings to pay attention to what she’s actually saying in them. You shouldn’t be engaging in a merely notional confrontation with those views—where “notional” is a euphemism for a self-conscious dialogue of the deaf.³⁰ Doing so simply models a dogmatist’s habits of inquiry and discourse, habits that in Rand’s case have become enshrined as intellectual virtues. I realize that old habits are hard to break, especially ones that have acquired the luster of professional respectability, but it’s worth remembering that there is luster in fool’s gold.

Rand opens *The Virtue of Selfishness* with the notorious claim that, despite its offensiveness to some, she uses the word “selfish” to denote

of the first edition of Michael Walzer’s *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), the literature proliferates with discussion of what Walzer refers to as “Supreme Emergency” in contexts of warfare. But Rand aside, there are no general discussions of the concept of emergency (or the ethics of emergencies) until the publication of an unrelated pair of papers in 1989: Julius Moravcsik’s “Between Reference and Meaning,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 14 (1989), pp. 68-83, and Terry Nardin’s “Realism and Redistribution,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 23 (1989), pp. 209-25. I tentatively conclude, then, that Rand seems to have been the first philosopher to have thematized the idea of an “ethics of emergencies” in late-twentieth-century moral philosophy.

³⁰ The phrase “notional confrontation” is Bernard Williams’s, from his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 160-63.

virtuous qualities of conduct “for the reason that makes you afraid of it.”³¹ The claim is often misconstrued to mean that Rand wants the reader to be afraid of egoists and egoism. It’s also wrongly taken to mean that most people fear their own mercenary desires, lacking the courage to express them in overt action, so that an ethos of selfishness is intended to embolden such people, giving them free rein for the expression of power-lust or greed.

In fact, Rand means just the reverse of both claims. Her point is that if the reader’s reflexive reaction to the word “selfishness” is fear—and twenty years’ worth of teaching and conversation induce me to think that it often is—her book is the antidote to that fear, intended to induce the reader to confront the reasons behind it. If the fear really is reflexive, the reasons for it will be buried beneath irrational defense mechanisms, and a confrontation with the book’s claims will provide a salutary exercise in self-confrontation and self-discovery. In fact, her point is that it’s the conventional conception of egoism that presupposes a fear-ridden, mercenary outlook on life, one that her “new concept of egoism” is intended to replace.

Personally, that isn’t the way I would have opened a book on egoism (or anything else), and it isn’t the way I think a book on the subject (or any subject) ought to begin. One can’t complain (as Rand does, in the same book) about the illegitimacy of “arguments from intimidation,”³² and then begin a book *with* an argument from intimidation. That’s to make a transparent show of flouting one’s own ethical advice in a book that is often rather militant and shrill in offering such advice.

Still, she has a point. Much of the fear of egoism really *is* reflexive, and is based on hand-waving armchair “intuitions” about what the (English)

³¹ Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. vii.

For an example of the fear to which Rand alludes, see Rosalind Hursthouse’s comment in her *On Virtue Ethics*: “My conclusion, in this chapter, is that [virtue ethics] offers a distinctively unfamiliar version of the view that morality is a form of enlightened self-interest, a version so unfamiliar that probably, as things are at the moment, that is a dangerously misleading way to describe it” (*On Virtue Ethics* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001], p. 190). Hursthouse’s view implies that even if “enlightened self-interest” were the truth about morality, its truth would be too dangerous to discuss in public. It’s not clear whether, on Hursthouse’s view, the truth about morality will ever be discussable within the foreseeable future.

Interestingly, Hursthouse’s claim here flatly contradicts what she says elsewhere about moral knowledge: “But the sort of wisdom that the fully virtuous person has is not supposed to be recondite: it does not call for fancy philosophical sophistication, and it does not depend upon, let alone wait upon, the discoveries of academic philosophers” (Rosalind Hursthouse, “Virtue Theory and Abortion,” in *Virtue Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997], p. 228). Apparently, enlightened self-interest is an ad hoc exception to this rule.

³² Ayn Rand, “The Argument from Intimidation,” in Rand, *Virtue of Selfishness*, chap. 19.

words “egoism,” “self-interest,” and “selfishness” are supposed to mean, as well as what those (supposed) meanings are supposed to entail about moral truth. Gotthelf’s comment on this issue is apt:

One consequence of [Rand’s originality] is the need to understand her in her own terms. Readers must take her words in context, and understand her definitions and her reasons for them. One mustn’t assume that she means by some words just what those words would mean if one said them oneself, or if some other philosopher did.

The most familiar example is her conception of *selfishness*. The ordinary connotation, of someone blindly insensitive to the existence or rights of others, who would ‘trample over others’ if he thought he could ‘get away with it’, bespeaks, in her view, an incredibly distorted sense of what is actually in a human being’s interest The traditional usage reflects both a moral antagonism toward the pursuit of self-interest and a corrupt view of what is in a person’s interest—and so leaves us, Ayn Rand observed, without a neutral term for a passionate, rational commitment to one’s own self-interest. But it is a fact that some of a person’s actions will be in his interest and others not, and it is crucial to conceptualize that fact. And so she retains the term, and rejects the common connotation, titling her collection of essays on ethics *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism*.³³

Fears about egoism wouldn’t be so bad if there were good reasons for them, but to qualify as fears of *Randian* egoism (as opposed to Thrasymachean, Hobbesian, or Nietzschean egoisms), such fears would somehow have to be rooted in Rand’s writings. That, in turn, presupposes mastery of those writings—an achievement rarer, in my experience, than the brash claims made about them.

I am not saying *a priori* that there can be no reasons for rejecting Rand’s claims. I am simply pointing out that if there are such reasons, there should be no reluctance to anthologize Rand’s writings in textbooks that go out of their way to criticize Rand’s views. After all, if we really have reason to fear Rand’s views, let’s read them, and be afraid—very afraid. But it makes no sense to refuse to read them—or subtly induce students not to read them—and then to cower in fear of (or recoil in disgust at) texts that one hasn’t read.³⁴ Or rather, it makes a certain kind of sense, but only in the context of an abject sort of intellectual bad faith.

³³ Gotthelf, *On Ayn Rand*, p. 10.

³⁴ Once again, Hursthouse provides the perfect example:

We can interpret Thrasymachus, and more obviously Nietzsche and Ayn Rand as saying that, rather like hive bees, human beings fall by nature, into

The remedy, I suppose, is relatively obvious, and I leave it to the reader to figure it out. But who will tell the textbook editors?³⁵

two distinct groups, the weak and the strong (or the especially clever or talented or ‘chosen by destiny’), whose members must be evaluated differently, as worker bees and the drones or queens are.
(*On Virtue Ethics*, p. 253)

Contrary to Hursthouse, this is not an “obvious” interpretation of Rand; it’s the kind of interpretation one might produce if one hadn’t read a word Rand had written. Tellingly, no work by Rand (or for that matter, Nietzsche) appears in the bibliography of *On Virtue Ethics*.

³⁵ A shorter version of this essay was published as a blog post at the website of the (second) Institute for Objectivist Studies. Thanks to Marsha Enright, Merlin Jetton, Roderick Long, and David Riesbeck for helpful discussion.

