

DERIVING RIGHTS FROM EGOISM: MACHAN vs. RAND

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In his book *Individuals and Their Rights*, Tibor Machan presents an argument deriving individual rights from an ethics of rational egoism (or, to use his term, classical egoism). Machan cites Ayn Rand throughout his book, and regards his own arguments as a more detailed and systematic presentation of the argument sketched by Rand. However, I submit that Machan's argument is significantly different from Rand's.

Rand's arguments are often misinterpreted in a form similar to Machan's. To a large extent, this is the result of the lack of a systematic presentation of Rand's philosophy, and of the brief, sketchy form in which she presented her views. However, a close reading of her statements on this subject, and a look at other, less easily available sources (such as taped lectures by Leonard Peikoff, who has had the advantage of long personal discussions with Rand), reveal a line of argument very different from - and, I submit, much sounder than - Machan's.

There are two aspects in which Machan's argument differs from Rand's:

- (1) Machan justifies his interpersonal ethics through a "substitution principle", the idea that rationality requires you to grant to other human beings the same rights that your

own nature requires. Rand, on the other hand, justifies her interpersonal ethics by demonstrating the effect that acting on the proper principles will have directly on your own life. (2) Machan uses the concept of rights in interpersonal ethics, i.e., in morally guiding an individual's actions towards others. For Rand, on the other hand, rights are not relevant to guiding an individual's actions; they are principles guiding the organization of a social structure.

1. From Egoism to Interpersonal Ethics.

Machan's argument of why a person should not initiate force or fraud towards others, is:

Rational persons - ones who choose to use their minds - treat doors as doors need to be treated and learn what doors are; eat food that is digestible, and acknowledge that the moon is not made of green cheese. Similarly, when rational persons voluntarily, intentionally interact with other rational persons, their nature as moral agents - free and equally morally responsible agents who require 'moral space' for living their lives in line with their natures (as the human individuals they are) - will be a condition of that interaction . . .

This moral obligation to succeed in one's particular life as a rational agent through the voluntary choice to interact with essentially similar others who also ought to (and may be expected to) want to refrain from undermining their moral nature, will bind each person to rationally respect everyone's moral space.¹

The argument, basically, is: in order to live as a human being, you need to be free from force and fraud. Rationality requires you to identify other human being's nature, and identify that they are similar to you and therefore require the same freedom. It would therefore be wrong to ignore this and use force or fraud against them.

Central to this argument is the "substitution principle," the idea that an identification of the requirements of your life should lead you to grant to others the same requirements.² There is no trace of the substitution principle anywhere in Rand's writings, and she would not have regarded it as valid. If you accept an ethics of egoism (as both Rand and Machan do); if you hold "*his own life* as the ethical *purpose*

of every individual man”;³ then an individual man may identify that other men’s lives require that he leave them free from force and fraud, but that is not by itself a sufficient reason for him to do so. This is an obvious and, I submit, unanswerable objection that an egoist ethics would pose to any use of the substitution principle.

Let us now look at Rand’s arguments on the same subject:

The men who attempt to survive, not by means of reason, but by means of force, are attempting to survive by the method of animals. But just as animals would not be able to survive by attempting the method of plants, by rejecting locomotion and waiting for the soil to feed them - so men cannot survive by attempting the method of animals, by rejecting reason and counting on productive *men* to serve as their prey. Such looters may achieve their goals for the range of a moment, at the price of destruction: the destruction of their victims and their own.⁴

Honesty is the recognition of the fact that the unreal is unreal and can have no value, that neither love nor fame nor cash is a value if obtained by fraud - that an attempt to gain a value by deceiving the mind of others is an act of raising your victims to a position higher than reality, where you become a pawn of their blindness, a slave of their non-thinking and their evasions, while their intelligence, their rationality, their perceptiveness become the enemies you have to dread and flee - that you do not care to live as a dependent, least of all a dependent on the stupidity of others, or as a fool whose source of values is the fools he succeeds in fooling - that honesty is not a social duty, not a sacrifice for the sake of others, but the most profoundly selfish virtue man can practice: his refusal to sacrifice the reality of his own existence to the deluded consciousness of others.⁵

These statements support honesty and non-initiation of force by demonstrating how a man acting against these principles prevents his *own* successful life as a man. Like Machan, Rand bases her argument on a neo-Aristotelian view of man, identifying that man has a specific nature and, in order to live successfully, must act in a specific way. But her argument, proceeding from this premise, is different from Machan’s; her argument is that a person should be honest and avoid initiating force, *not* because acting on these principles is a requirement for other people’s lives, but because it is a direct requirement of his

own life.

Central to Rand's argument is the identification of man's need to act on principles. Man's mind does not work by considering, in every decision, all aspects of the present situation from scratch; in the same way and for the same reason that man must form concepts to allow him to gain knowledge about concretes, he must form principles of action to allow him to make decisions in concrete situations. Thus, for example, for a man to act dishonestly in any situation, he would have to reject the *principle* of honesty (adopting in its place, perhaps, a rule of conduct such as "you may act dishonestly as long as you can't see a reasonable possibility of getting caught"). Rand argues that a man who does so, adopting a policy of regularly acting dishonestly, can't achieve a successful life proper to a human being (the same applies, equivalently, to initiation of force).

The clearest and most detailed illustration, available in print, of the nature of Rand's argument, is Leonard Peikoff's description of his first discussion with Rand on the subject of honesty:

She started her answer by asking me to invent the most plausible lie I could think of. I don't remember the details any longer, but I know that I did proceed to concoct a pretty good con-man scheme for bilking investors out of large sums of money. Ayn Rand then analyzed the example patiently, for thirty or forty minutes, showing me on my own material how one lie would lead necessarily to another, how I would be forced into contradictory lies, how I would gradually become trapped in my own escalating deceptions, and why, therefore, sooner or later, in one form or another, my con-man scheme would have to backfire and lead to the loss of the very things I was seeking to gain by it . . .

My immediate reaction to her reply was to amend my initial scheme in order to remove the particular weaknesses she had found in it. So I made up a second con-man scheme, and again she analyzed it patiently, showing that it would lead to the same disastrous results even though most of the details were now different . . .

The essence of a con-man's lie," [Rand explained], "of any such lie, no matter what the details, is the attempt to gain a value by faking certain facts of reality . . .

Since all facts of reality are interrelated, faking one of them leads a person to fake others; ultimately, he is committed

to an all-out war against reality as such. But this is the kind of war no one can win. If life in reality is a man's purpose, how can he expect to achieve it while struggling at the same time to escape and defeat reality?"

And she concluded: "The con-man's lies are wrong on *principle*. To state the principle positively: honesty is a long-range requirement of human self-preservation and is, therefore, a moral obligation.⁶

The above clearly shows how, in Rand's view, you should be honest because of the damage that dishonesty will directly cause to *your own* life. There is no trace of the substitution principle, or of Machan's line of argument.

2. Interpersonal Ethics and Rights.

Machan derives rights as principles both of interpersonal ethics - guiding an individual's actions towards others - and of social organization. In fact, he does not even distinguish between the two. For example, in the opening of ch. 4 of *Individuals and Their Rights*, he identifies the subject matter of politics (and therefore of rights, as the central principle of politics) as "interactions with strangers, people who are members of our larger communities, but not family or friends"; he clearly regards the question of how an *individual* should act towards strangers, and the question of how the social system under which individuals live should be organized, as the same question.

For Rand, on the other hand, rights are involved only in the latter. Her discussions of interpersonal ethics (e.g., the sections of Galt's speech, and of "The Objectivist Ethics," devoted to the principles of moral behaviour towards others) do not mention rights.

Rand's interpersonal ethics consists, in essence, of three principles: honesty, in its interpersonal aspects; the virtue of justice (being rational in your personal judgment of other people and acting on your judgment); and non-initiation of force. Rights enter the picture at a later stage, the stage of politics; they specify, not how an individual should act towards others, but how a social system should be organized, and what individual acts should be legally forbidden; and rights are justified by arguing that a social system recognizing rights is the only one that makes successful human life possible for people living under it.

Every action that violates someone's rights will also violate some principle of Rand's interpersonal ethics (either non-initiation of force

or honesty). However, the reverse is not true; on Rand's view, there are many immoral actions, violating interpersonal ethics - including immoral actions towards strangers - that do not violate anyone's rights. This is most clearly true of the virtue of justice; many actions are unjust, and therefore immoral on Rand's view, without violating anyone's rights (one obvious example is private racial discrimination).

Let us compare two different examples of actions towards strangers, violating Rand's interpersonal ethics: (a) armed robbery, and (b) private racial discrimination (e.g., refusing to rent apartments, in a building you own, to blacks). Only (a) involves violation of rights. What difference does that make in guiding a rational individual's actions? None whatever. A rational individual would never perform either action; he would despise anyone who performs either action; there's no way in which the fact that (a) is a violation of rights makes it, for a rational individual, in any sense worse than (b). Rights do not have any significance in guiding an individual's actions. It is only in the context of an organized social system that rights become significant (since they imply that only (a), and not (b), should be legally punished).

A further illustration of why rights don't apply to guiding individual interpersonal behaviour can be seen in the following scenario: Suppose A and B are two persons living alone on a desert island. A beats up B and takes the food that B has gathered. In evaluating A's actions, if you say "A initiated force, and what he did was immoral," you have, in effect, exhausted everything there is to say about it. If you then add "and on top of that, he violated B's rights!" what would that addition mean? It is, again, only in the context of an organized social system that bringing up B's rights has any meaning (since it would then imply that A should not only be morally condemned for his actions, but also legally punished).⁷

This point, therefore, again represents a significant difference in Machan's and Rand's understanding of, and arguments for, individual rights.

1. *Individuals and Their Rights*, pp. 58-59.

2. The term "substitution principle" does not appear in Machan's book, but he has used it in his discussion of his book at the meeting of the American Association for the Philosophic Study of Society, December 1990; and the principle is clearly implicit in his argument in the book.

3. "The Objectivist Ethics," in *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet, 1964) p. 25. From several statements Machan makes throughout ch. 2 of his book, it is clear that he also accepts this principle.
4. "The Objectivist Ethics," pp. 23-24.
5. Galt's speech, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Signet, 1957) p. 945.
6. "My Thirty Years with Ayn Rand", in *The Voice of Reason*, (New York: Meridian, 1988), p. 340. The same example is discussed in somewhat more detail in Peikoff's *Objectivism: the Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, (New York: Dutton, 1991), pp.270--271. Some more detailed analysis of Rand's arguments on honesty and non-initiation of force is available in Peikoff's taped lectures, especially "Understanding Objectivism" and "Objectivism: State of the Art."
7. This illustration was given by Leonard Peikoff in his course *The Philosophy of Objectivism*. Note that this course was given during Rand's life, and she has heard and endorsed it as accurately representing her philosophy.