

Rand Revisited

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Past

It has been thirty-two years since I last talked to Ayn Rand, almost thirty since I last read her for guidance.

Ayn Rand was important to philosophy in this last century, in at least three ways. First, she convinced many good philosophers to be philosophers. Many adolescents of us embraced her vision of philosophy as a noble career. Some of them have contributed to the field.

Second, she inspired us to serve humanist values. Advised by her, we (at least I) came to philosophy concerned: (1) to defend reason against skepticism; (2) to defend human achievement against those who decry and belittle it; (3) to advocate an ethics of human flourishing, virtue-ethics, against any claim of unelected duty; and (4) to treat rights as important, against the then politically dominant utilitarianism.²

Present

. . . [a person] must acquire the values of character that make his life worth sustaining – . . . man . . . is a being of self-made soul – . . . to live requires a sense of self-value, but man, who has no automatic values, has no automatic sense of self-esteem and must earn it by shaping his soul in the image of his moral ideal, in the image of Man, the rational being he is born able to create, but must create by choice . . . a soul that seeks above all else to achieve its own moral perfection.³

Invited to remark on Ayn Rand's influence and relevance, I have revisited some of her writings, thirty years on, and I have been struck by the importance of one of her views, not much explored. It is the role she assigned to objectivity in perfectionist ethical theory.

Rand held that being moral makes humans excellent. Morality's primary question about anything, *x*, is: does *x* realize or impede a person's

flourishing?⁴ We do not get all of her perfectionist theory, unless we integrate it with her main title idea, objectivity.

Ayn Rand drew attention to three ontological categories,

- *Intrinsic*: “inherent in things as such,” independent of consciousness of it.
- *Subjective*: “consciousness, independent of reality.”⁵
- *Objective*: “produced by man’s consciousness in accordance with the facts of reality, as mental integrations of factual data computed by man – as products of a cognitive method of classification whose process must be performed by man, but whose content is dictated by reality.”⁶

Values, the good and virtues are objective entities. The *objective* theory holds that the good is . . . *an evaluation* of the facts of reality by man’s consciousness according to a rational standard of value. . . . The *objective* theory holds that *the good is an aspect of reality in relation to man* . . . values, objective entities, are produced through the interaction of a rational consciousness with the intrinsic. Rand stresses the place of choice in this production, meaning by “choose,” however, only, “act in a non-automatic way.”⁸ Rand urges that to produce values and to have them a person must *chose* to think about action and goals, and about action-organized-to-realize-goals (projects). In thinking about projects, one chose to think about the causal structure of the world discerning facts about causation. Action is organized into projects only in alignment with the causal nexus of reality.

In a project, people cognize their goals-of-action in the context of the causal nexus of the world. That cognition of goals of action in the causal nexus of the world, presents nodal points of awareness—awarenesses of ways one can use causal mechanisms in realizing goals. Each nodal point of awareness is an awareness of a causal potency as-an-available-aid-in-our-projects—each node is a value.

Whenever I value something, *x*, in the way indicated here, I must think of *x*, relative to some goal I am actively pursuing, and must, loyal to the facts about *x* and its causal properties, cognize *x* as a ready-to-use-aid that, if used by me will enhance my present project-activity. Insofar as I am engaged seriously in realizing a goal, my cognizance of *x-as-an-aid* includes the content that I am reasonably drawn toward using *x*.

Once I have cognized x as a ready-to-use-aid-that-can-enhance-my-activity-toward-realizing-a-goal, under that description I have classified it as a value. I should then *chose* to store it in my theory of the world, making it available for use as a value.

As one's knowledge of values grows one can and should choose to think about other value topics: about how actions themselves are values in projects, and of how the causal-aid-value was there to be seen only when it was cognized as possibly taken up into one's activity, enhancing it. One should *choose* to think about how projects mix with one another, some mixes better than others, also of how some ways of acting are better than others. This should culminate in one's adopting some mix of projects with their values—a mix that makes for living fully and well.

Every bit of this increasingly sophisticated assembly of information has to be brought into being by people choosing to think about action, goals and projects. All their values have to be made by them.

Non-conscious objects cannot have values. They cannot think, cannot value; and have no goals to be thought of. Humans have values by only by valuing.⁹

A value's ontological status as objective imposes a twofold ontological dependency. The value, x,¹⁰ will exist, only if a valuer will have *done things* that helped *produce the value* of the thing, x.

What must the valuer have done? —*think rationally* about the thing, *trusting* his judgment while fully *accepting* the discipline of the facts about the thing valued and its causal properties, and he has *produced* knowledge and a value. The last sentence reports that the valuer, in valuing instanced four of Rand's idiosyncratic list of seven virtues. If the person is self-aware of having done all this, he instances a fifth, pride. Characteristically valuing realizes an excellence of character.

For Rand, characteristically valuing and pursuing values is not an accumulating or using of things, but is using the mind in an excellent way. Her theory is not an individual-centered rival to utilitarianism, calling for maximizing-the-number-of-acquired-entities-that-are-valued. It is a perfectionist ethics, presented in a way that highlights one activity realizing human excellence—valuing.

It is importantly right that our values are not some factual given, parts of the background to human life and choice. They are achievements. Some people convince themselves that they do not have to create values and do not value. They think that values must exist, somehow, independent of their having done anything, not even thinking. Such people avoid valuing.

Such a person avoids valuing, avoids producing values by acting and thinking in the world. He puts himself into a position in which he has not engaged himself in valuing valuable things; he has not integrated things that could have been values for his projects into his projects and character. He has not integrated accurate awareness of good things into a structure of planning and character. Had he done so, the integrated awareness of values would have informed his life with value. He misses out on that value.

Rand's position as indicated and lightly amplified here seems importantly correct and worthy of further exploration.¹¹

1. Sadly, that put us (at least me) off Ayn Rand, for she decried with enraged, unjust smears many respectable artists, philosophers, writers . . . and people of affairs—people who created and maintain the bulk of our knowledge and culture. Incredibly she portrayed real human achievements as being the ugly aspects of what she saw as the dying of culture.

2. Some would add a fifth “good influence,” toward defending laissez-faire capitalism. I, with others, undertook that defense. But I now think laissez-faire is inconsistent with Rand's first four influences.

3. Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (NY: Random House, 1957), pp. 1020-1021.

4. Rand obscured her position by using the Hobbist language of “interests,” and by speaking of egoism, which can only be defined using the language of interests.

5. The quotations in this paragraph to this point are from Rand's “What is Capitalism,” in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (New York: New American Library, 1967), pp. 21-22.

6. Ayn Rand, “Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology, Chapter V: Definitions (Continued),” *The Objectivist* 5 (November 1966): 6.

7. “What is Capitalism,” p. 22. Here I follow Rand in using “value” and the “good” interchangeably in this context.

8. One chooses to walk or to think, but does not chose one's heart beating or choose to metabolize food.

9. "[A] moral commandment is a contradiction in terms. The moral is the chosen, . . ." *Atlas Shrugged*, p. 1018. For Rand's ascription of relatively primitive values pre-ethical, pre-moral code values to animals and plants as if they had purposes and projects, see her "The Objectivist Ethics," in *The Virtue Of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 18. That the values spoken of there are not the values spoken of in morality, on Rand's view, is proven by her claim that all that works for the survival of an animal or a plant, and so is a "value" to it, is functions in the activity of the animal or a plant automatically. The human values of perfectionist morality, in contrast, must be taken up into the life of a human by choice.

10. As opposed to the thing, *x*.

11. I am thankful to Laurence I. Gould and Ellen Stuttle for comments on an earlier draft of this paper