

Is Life the Ultimate Value? A Reassessment of Ayn Rand's Ethics

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1. Introduction: The Problem of Ultimate Value

We all value things. For example, we value friendships, prosperity, and knowledge. These seem to be good things and things worthy of pursuit. They seem better and more worthy of pursuit, at least, than do their opposites: enmity, poverty, and ignorance.

A notable fact about the things we consider valuable is that most of them appear to be valuable not merely as things worth having for their own sake, but as things worth having for the sake of something else. Consider prosperity: Though we genuinely value prosperity—we want it, we think it is good, and we act to gain and keep it—we value it not merely so as to be prosperous, but so as to achieve something further, such as steady access to food, drink, and clothes. Were it not for the food, drink, and clothes—and the other things that prosperity brings about, such as transportation, medicine, and homes—a great deal, if not all, of the value of prosperity would be lost. Food, drink, and clothes, moreover, do not seem to be ends in themselves either. Though they are *ends* of prosperity, they are also—from another perspective—*means* to avoid hunger, thirst, and cold. Furthermore, avoiding hunger, thirst, and cold seems to be a means to yet another end: remaining in good health.

Where does the chain of values end? It seems that the chain of values must end somewhere, for though *some* values can be values by virtue of being means to or constituent parts of further values, not *all* values can be values of this kind. If they were, all values would be values only insofar as they contribute to something further, in a justificatory regress. In order to get a chain of values off the ground, it seems that something will have to be valuable by virtue of itself, not by virtue of that to which it contributes. Aristotle puts forth this point as follows in the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

[T]hings achievable by action have some end that we wish for because of itself, and because of which we wish for the other things, . . . we do not choose everything because of something else—for if we do, it will go on without limit, so that desire will prove to be empty and futile.¹

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishers, 1999), I.2.1094a18-21.

Ayn Rand states the point like this in “The Objectivist Ethics”:

Without an ultimate goal or end, there can be no lesser goals or means: a series of means going off into an infinite progression towards a nonexistent end is a metaphysical and epistemological impossibility. It is only an ultimate goal, an *end in itself*, that makes the existence of values possible.²

What is ultimately valuable? There are many proposed answers. Some propose that ultimate value can be found in developing oneself to the fullest or in cultivating one’s character and one’s virtues. Others argue that it is ultimately valuable to have one’s preferences or desires satisfied, to act in accordance with one’s sentiments, or to experience enjoyment or pleasure. Still others argue that there are *several* things worth having for their own sake, without any of these being reducible to one supreme value; perhaps pleasure, knowledge, friendship, and virtue are all ultimately valuable.³

Rand’s suggested answer is that life is the ultimate value. Life, in Rand’s view, is the only thing worth having for its own sake, not for the sake of something else. All things, Rand maintains—from friendship, prosperity, and knowledge to enmity, poverty, and ignorance—are valuable or disvaluable (to an agent) in proportion to whether they enhance or undermine (that agent’s) life.⁴

How can Rand’s view—or, for that matter, any view—on the nature of ultimate value be justified? This is a difficult question, because it is not clear how we must proceed to justify an ultimate value. When we justify a non-ultimate value, such as prosperity, we do so by showing what it contributes to—for example, important goods such as food and medicine. This is a satisfactory justification for a non-ultimate value. It is not a satisfactory justification for an ultimate value, however, since an ultimate value—being truly ultimate—is not valuable in virtue of that to which it contributes. If it were, it would not be ultimate, and we would merely move the problem one additional step in the regress. When we seek to justify an ultimate value,

² Ayn Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: Signet, 1964), p. 17.

³ It is also possible to deny that there is an ultimate value, as anti-realists and coherentists do. I will not discuss those options here.

⁴ Rand’s own presentation of this point, which I discuss in detail below, is found primarily in her “This Is John Galt Speaking,” in Ayn Rand, *For the New Intellectual* (New York: Signet, 1963), pp. 117-92; Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 13-35; and Ayn Rand, “Causality versus Duty,” in Ayn Rand, *Philosophy: Who Needs It* (New York: Signet, 1982), pp. 95-101.

therefore, we have to show that something is valuable irrespective of that to which it contributes. How, if at all, can this be done?

My aim in this article is to present and assess Rand's justification for her view on this issue. I first (Section 2) present Rand's argument, with emphasis on her appeal to a specific dependence relationship between values and life. In order to understand the procedure involved in Rand's reasoning, and to bring out the distinctive force of her argument, I start by briefly discussing certain aspects of her epistemology. I thereafter (Section 3) raise a challenge to Rand's theory. This challenge concerns the reconciliation of two of the theory's features: on the one hand, its dependence on a pre-rational choice (the "choice to live"), and on the other hand, its objectivity and bindingness. I will refer to the tension between these two features as "the problem of subjectivity." I then (Section 4) examine four different attempts to solve this problem. These are, respectively, the solutions suggested by Douglas Rasmussen, Nathaniel Branden, Irfan Khawaja, and Allan Gotthelf. For each of these suggestions, I explain why I believe it is unsatisfactory. I then (Section 5) present my own position on the issue. In a nutshell, the view for which I will argue is that the claim "life is the ultimate value" can be understood in two different ways: either as a claim about the ultimate purpose of valuing or as a claim about the proper ultimate standard of practical reasoning. In the latter sense, I argue, we are justified in holding that life is the ultimate value. In the former sense, however, we are not. In the former sense, *happiness*, not life, is the ultimate value—and grasping this, I further argue, is crucial to grasp how "life is the ultimate value" in the latter sense can be justified. At the end of the article I indicate my reasons for believing that this view might also have been Rand's own, and I offer, in support of this, a new interpretation of her distinction between an "ultimate purpose" and a "standard of value."

2. The Dependence of "Value" on "Life"

Rand writes:

What is morality, or ethics? It is a code of values to guide man's choices and actions—the choices and actions that determine the purpose and the course of his life. Ethics, as a science, deals with discovering and defining such a code.

The first question that has to be answered, as a precondition of any attempt to define, to judge or to accept any specific system of ethics, is: *Why* does man need a code of values?

Let me stress this. The first question is not: What particular code of values should man accept? The first question is: Does man need values at all—and why?⁵

⁵ Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 13.

What Rand urges in these three short paragraphs is to search for what gives rise to the distinction between the valuable and the disvaluable. We should not, Rand claims, merely take this distinction and these concepts for granted. We should ask *why* we need them; we should seek to identify what purpose, if any, drawing this distinction and forming these concepts serves.

So as to understand what such a procedure involves and why Rand deems it helpful, we must see it as part of the epistemological background from which Rand approaches the problem of value. In *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, Rand presents what Darryl Wright has coined her “basing requirement for concepts.”⁶ This requirement states that when using concepts, “one must be able to retrace the specific (logical, not chronological) steps by which they were formed, and one must be able to demonstrate their connection to their base in perceptual reality.”⁷ This holds for the concept “value” as for all other concepts. In order to understand this requirement, we must understand, at least in outline, what Rand thinks on a more general level is the nature and purpose of concepts.

Rand is an epistemic foundationalist who holds that all knowledge is ultimately based on perceptual experience. Concepts, within this framework, are tools we use to organize and draw inferences from our perceptual experiences. More specifically, concepts are mental groupings of the entities we perceive, based upon these entities’ intrinsic or extrinsic similarities.⁸ Even though we can form complex concepts—and we can use concepts as the basis of forming new concepts (say, we form “furniture” on the basis of “chair,” “table,” and “sofa”)—all concepts must ultimately refer back to entities that we perceive. If they don’t, they fail to fulfill the purpose for which we need them, namely, helping us to organize and draw inferences from our perceptual experiences.

Tracing concepts back to their perceptual basis is a crucial component in Rand’s philosophical methodology, the motivation for which is to ensure that we have our concepts firmly anchored in reality. When we use concepts that we are *not* ultimately able to trace back to perceptual experiences, we are using what Rand calls “floating abstractions.”⁹ Floating abstractions are

⁶ Darryl F. Wright, “Evaluative Concepts and Objective Values: Rand on Moral Objectivity,” *Social Philosophy & Policy* 25, no. 1 (2008), p. 168.

⁷ Ayn Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, expanded 2nd ed. (New York: Meridian, 1990), p. 51.

⁸ For a discussion of Rand’s view on what similarities are, and how similarities can give rise to concepts, see Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, chaps. 1–3; and Allan Gotthelf, “Ayn Rand on Concepts,” accessed online at: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/metaphysics/science/naicpapers/gotthelf.pdf>.

⁹ Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Meridian, 1991), p. 96.

abstractions that we have taken over from others without having gone through the mental steps of forming them for ourselves. The reason why such conceptual second-handedness is problematic is that when we merely take concepts over from others, we do not grasp first-hand what things in reality they refer to, and we are doomed to use our concepts in the same way children use concepts from the adult world which they lack the necessary experiential background to form. Though children might have a vague and associative understanding of what, say, “mortgage” means, and though they can parrot it and apply it correctly in some contexts, they do not grasp it. As philosophers in search of a sound theory of value, we should ensure that we do not treat the central concept “value” as a six-year-old treats “mortgage.”

What, then, is the observational foundation of the concept “value”? According to Rand, the concept “value” rests on observations of intentional action, which is action performed in order to reach a goal. We observe intentional action when we observe that someone goes to bed *in order to sleep*, lifts a cup *in order to drink*, turns on the air conditioner *in order to cool the room*; that is, when we observe that someone acts so as to achieve certain effects. Values, as we first and in an elementary sense encounter them, are the goals of intentional action. As Rand defines it, a value is “that which one acts to gain and/or keep.”¹⁰

Having grasped “value”—the *goal* of an intentional action—Rand claims that we are in a position to form two other concepts intimately related to “value”: “valuer,” which refers to an *agent* performing an action, and “valuing,” which refers to an *action* performed by an agent for the sake of reaching a goal. Indeed, these three concepts are interdependent: None makes sense without the others.

Most of us form the concepts “value,” “valuer,” and “valuing” from observing human behavior, both our own and that of others. These concepts, however, also apply to animal behavior (in Rand’s view, they apply across the biological realm). To the extent that a cat intentionally runs *in order to* catch a mouse, there is a valuer (the cat), a value (catching the mouse), and valuing (the chasing). Also, and as far as the mouse runs *in order to* escape the cat, there is—from the mouse’s perspective—a valuer (the mouse), a value (avoiding being caught by the cat) and valuing (the running away). This provides us with an observational basis for evaluative terms.

Having grasped “value” and its corollaries “valuer” and “valuing,” Rand claims that we can identify an important relationship between the

¹⁰ Rand, “This Is John Galt Speaking,” in Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, p. 121. Rand operates with two definitions of “value,” one descriptive and one normative. These, importantly, are not two different concepts referred to by the same word. The normative definition, as Rand sees it, is a development of the descriptive definition. I discuss this issue in more detail below. For Rand’s view on the contextual nature of definitions, see Ayn Rand, “Definitions,” in Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, pp. 40-54.

phenomenon of “value” and another phenomenon, “life”—namely, that it is only within the realm of living things that values exist. Non-living things—such as stones, rivers, windows, cigarettes, and application forms—do not value anything, nor are they able to. Though such non-living things are involved in various goal-directed actions, they do not themselves pursue goals.

This correlation between “value” and “life” is not accidental. On the one hand, life seems to be what makes values possible, since it is only living things that can pursue goals. On the other hand, life seems not only to make values possible, but also to make values necessary. Life can only be sustained under certain conditions, and actions are required on the part of living organisms in order to meet these conditions.

Most values, moreover, seem to be geared toward different organisms’ lives: chasing mice (as cats do) is vital to cats, and escaping cats (as mice do) is vital to mice. Cats that stop chasing mice and mice that stop escaping cats will die. They are unlikely to die at the very instant they stop valuing, but they will nonetheless fail to do what is required by them to remain alive, thus staying temporarily alive only for so long as the surplus of past actions can carry them. It is in this sense that life seemingly makes values not only possible, but also necessary—necessary, if life is to be sustained.

Following Rand’s reasoning one step further, we may observe that the relationship between values and life is not only a means/end relationship, but also a constituency relationship. Valuing is both what sustains life *and* a crucial part of what constitutes life. This is important to Rand, and it is made clear by her definition of life as “a process of self-sustaining, self-generated action.”¹¹ This definition can be rephrased in terms of values. In terms of values, life is a process where a *valuer* (an agent) *values* (runs a process in order to) a *value* (sustain itself). Values, therefore, seem to be as deeply interconnected with *life* as they are to valuers and valuing, because valuing both constitutes and sustains life.

According to Rand, it is only within the context of a living being, whose life must be sustained by this being’s own actions, that the phenomenon of values occurs. To illustrate this principle, Rand invites us to imagine “an immortal, indestructible robot, an entity which moves and acts, but which cannot be affected by anything, which cannot be changed in any respect, which cannot be damaged, injured or destroyed.” Such an entity, Rand maintains, “would not be able to have any values; it would have nothing to lose; it could not regard anything as *for* or *against* it, as serving or threatening its welfare, as fulfilling or frustrating its interest. It could have no interests and no goals.”¹² Her point is that without the fundamental alternative of life or death, values are impossible. Without an organism that is

¹¹ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 15.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 16. I discuss this example in detail below.

vulnerable—in the sense that its life can be threatened or, alternatively, enhanced—the question of value does not arise. Moreover, in adherence with the grounding requirement for concepts, this is the only context in which Rand believes it makes sense to speak of values. Values occur because we have a life that can be threatened or enhanced—and because we, through our actions, can affect this.

To speak of values apart from a life that can be threatened or enhanced, and for other purposes than enhancing life, is to treat “value” as a floating abstraction not anchored in facts of reality. Rand thus rejects all claims of “free-floating value,” that is, value that is not tied to a valuer and a life being valued. The reason why is that this sort of claim “divorces the concept of ‘good’ from beneficiaries, and the concept of ‘value’ from valuer and purpose—claiming that the good is good in, by and of itself.”¹³ A paradigmatic example of a free-floating value is G. E. Moore’s “Beautiful World.” According to Moore, a beautiful world has value in and of itself, and would retain its value even if there were no valuers there to benefit from its beauty.¹⁴ Speaking of value in such a sense is, in Rand’s view, to use the concept “value” in the absence of that which gives the concept meaning: a life that can be enhanced or threatened. Speaking of values in the absence of lives, therefore, is tantamount to speaking of “libraries” in the absence of “books” or of “funerals” in the absence of “deaths.” “Value” is a derivative phenomenon made possible by the phenomenon of life, so “value” is hierarchically dependent upon “life” in the same way “library” is dependent on “book” and “funeral” is dependent on “death.” Rand explains:

Metaphysically, *life* is the only phenomenon that is an end in itself: a value gained and kept by a constant process of action. Epistemologically, the concept of “value” is genetically dependent upon and derived from the antecedent concept of “life.” To speak of “value” as apart from “life” is worse than a contradiction in terms. “It is only the concept of ‘Life’ that makes the concept of ‘Value’ possible.”¹⁵

Thus Rand speaks of values only *in relation to individual living entities*. “It is

¹³ Ayn Rand, “What Is Capitalism?” in Ayn Rand, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, Centennial ed. (New York: New American Library, 1967), p. 13. Rand sometimes called a value that is divorced from any beneficiary an *intrinsic value*. This terminological choice might be confusing to some contemporary readers. Today, such value is commonly referred to as “value *period*,” or “absolute value,” and is contrasted with “value *for*.” On Rand’s view, all values are values *for*.

¹⁴ G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, ed. Thomas Baldwin, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 132–47.

¹⁵ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 17.

only,” she argues, “to a living entity that things can be good or evil.”¹⁶ To the extent that friendships, books, hospitals, computers, and kindergartens are valuable, they are valuable *to* someone. If they are not valuable to someone, they are not valuable at all, since in the absence of a relation to someone, the question of value or disvalue does not arise—and speaking of “value” in such a sense is to speak of “value” in a context in which one is not justified in using it. To do so would be to commit what Rand calls the “fallacy of the stolen concept,” which is to use a concept outside of the context in which one is justified in using it.¹⁷

So far, we have discussed values in relation to living organisms in general. How does Rand get us from descriptive biological values—which concern all living organisms—to human values and to ethical values? In order to understand this, we must understand in what relevant respects Rand takes humans to be different from other animals. Rand writes that

an animal has no choice in the knowledge and the skills that it acquires; it can only repeat them generation after generation. And an animal has no choice in the standard of value directing its actions: its senses provide it with an *automatic* code of values, an automatic knowledge of what is good for it or evil, what benefits or endangers its life. An animal has no power to extend its knowledge or to evade it. In situations for which its knowledge is inadequate, it perishes—as, for instance, an animal that stands paralyzed on the track of a railroad in the path of a speeding train. But so long as it lives, an animal acts on its knowledge.¹⁸

Animals are automatic value-seekers in that they have instincts that guide their actions toward survival. Human beings are not like animals in this respect. As humans, we have a much more complex and plastic repertoire of actions, and are thus *not* automatic value-seekers. Though we have a pleasure/pain mechanism that roughly prompts us to perform basic life-enhancing actions, we can also err and evade, and indeed, we have the ability systematically to pursue courses of actions that harm us. We can become hermits, terrorists, Nazis, or bums who merely live from moment to moment according to what feels good at the time. Doing such things, however, will not promote a human life. In order to promote our lives, Rand claims, we need long-term plans and principles, and we need guidance in the process of forming such principles. Providing such guidance is what morality, in Rand’s

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁷ Rand, “Axiomatic Concepts,” in Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, pp. 59-61.

¹⁸ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” p. 19.

view, is about. As we saw in the definition quoted above, morality is “a code of values to guide man’s choices and actions.” Because of our nature, we need morality for the same reason that birds need nests and trees need sunlight; we need morality so as to sustain and enhance our lives.¹⁹ (For more about the practical consequences of Rand’s normative ethics—which I will not discuss here—see Rand’s *The Virtue of Selfishness* and Tara Smith’s *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics*.²⁰)

3. The Problem of Subjectivity

So far I have surveyed Rand’s arguments for three main claims:

- (1) Values are made possible by life.
- (2) Life, in turn, is constituted by and depends upon valuing.
- (3) Values exist only in relation to living agents.

I think these observations are all correct, and that they have important implications for value theory and philosophy of biology. Still, none of these observations, either alone or in conjunction, establishes that life is the ultimate value. These observations are compatible with but do not establish it.

First, they do not establish that, descriptively, life is the goal of all valuing. Though the ultimate reason organisms need to pursue values might be that such activity is required to sustain their lives—and though a great many of our actions are in fact life-enhancing—we are clearly able to pursue values that harm our lives. The most obvious example is suicide.

This, though, is not what Rand claims to establish. Rand does not defend the view that we in fact *do* value only that which is life-promoting (a psychological thesis), but rather the view that we *should* value, or have reason to value, only that which is life-promoting (an ethical thesis). This ethical thesis, moreover, is very different from the psychological thesis. In fact, the

¹⁹ Implicit in this lies a distinctive metaethical position. On the one hand, Rand’s theory of value is agent-centered and agent-relative. In her view, an object that is good for me need not be good for you. This, however, does not make Rand a moral subjectivist. Rand is an objectivist. The reason why is that even though “valuable” and “disvaluable” do not refer to objects, they refer to relationships between agents and objects. What is valuable to an agent is that which stands in a beneficial relationship to the agent; the disvaluable is that which stands in a harmful relationship to that agent. What things and actions stand in such a relationship, moreover—though it might vary from one agent to another—is a factual matter open to empirical investigation. This is why, in the definition quoted above, Rand speaks of ethics as a “science.” Note also that for Rand, “value” is the fundamental normative concept. “Right,” “good,” “virtue,” “reason for action,” “ought,” and “should” are all ultimately defined in terms of “value.”

²⁰ Tara Smith, *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

two theses seem incompatible. If all of our actions were automatically to promote life, we would not need guidance to reach that goal. It is precisely because the psychological thesis is false that we need the ethical thesis.

What, then, is needed in addition to the argument above in order to ground the view that life is the ultimate value in the prescriptive sense? According to Rand, what is needed is a *choice to live*—a commitment to continue living.

In John Galt's speech in *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand writes that her morality "is contained in a single axiom: existence exists—and in a single choice: to live."²¹ In "Causality versus Duty" she writes, "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 actions are required to implement his choice. If he does not choose to live, nature will take its course."²² As is expressed in the latter quotation, the choice to live is a pre-moral, pre-rational choice. Rather than this choice itself being either moral or rational, the choice to live opens up the realm of ethics and of reasons for action. Ethics provides rules for living, so if living is not a goal, the science of ethics does not arise.

Rand did not write extensively on the choice to live. This is unfortunate, for the choice to live, at least on some interpretations, appears to cast doubt on the binding force of moral obligations. It might seem, as writes Douglas Rasmussen, that if morality depends on a *choice to live*—a choice which is not rationality-apt—then "obligation is hypothetical" (rather than categorical), since by making a different pre-moral choice an agent might "choose to opt out of the 'moral game'."²³ This, Rasmussen argues, is problematic, for moral obligations are supposed to be obligations that we cannot opt out of. We do not accept "Well, I chose otherwise" as a satisfying excuse if we blame someone for not living up to his moral obligations. The "choosing otherwise" is not supposed to be the solution in such cases. It is supposed to be the problem.

Still, some of Rand's formulations do seem to point in a direction that suggests it is indeed possible to opt out of morality. In Galt's speech, Rand explicitly writes that "you do not have to live."²⁴ In "The Moral Revolution in *Atlas Shrugged*," written by Nathaniel Branden and approved by Rand, we read that "[t]he man who does not wish to hold life as his goal and standard is free not to hold it."²⁵ On such a view, we could still blame, for their lack of

²¹ Rand, "This Is John Galt Speaking," in Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, p. 128.

²² Rand, "Causality versus Duty," in Rand, *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 99.

²³ Douglas Rasmussen, "Rand on Obligation and Value," *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2002), p. 71.

²⁴ Rand, "This Is John Galt Speaking," in Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, p. 124.

²⁵ Nathaniel Branden, "The Moral Revolution in *Atlas Shrugged*," in *Who Is Ayn*

consistency, those who choose to live yet who do not take the required actions. But, as notes Darryl Wright, there are

individuals, such as suicide terrorists, who could only be described as patently life-hating, obsessed with destroying themselves and innocent others. It would be hard to view them as choosing to live, and yet it seems equally as unacceptable to hold that they have no moral obligations, as if their nihilism were a moral dispensation.²⁶

A similar worry is raised by Irfan Khawaja, who argues that, granted morality's dependence on a choice to live, obligations appear merely "hypothetical," and thus "arbitrary" and "escapable." In a question that aptly formulates the problem, Khawaja asks: "If the Objectivist view is really 'objective', how can morality's binding force rest on a choice? Doesn't it then collapse into subjectivity?"²⁷ If Rand's theory is to be firmly supported, this problem—which I call the problem of subjectivity—must be solved.

4. Four Suggested Solutions to the Problem of Subjectivity

I shall now examine four different attempts to resolve the problem of subjectivity, and provide my reasons for believing that these attempts are unsuccessful. Thereafter, I sketch my own position on the issue.

a. The argument from denying the choice to live (Douglas Rasmussen)

Rasmussen seeks to solve the problem of subjectivity by arguing that morality in fact does *not* rest on a pre-moral choice to live. Rasmussen's view is that "[l]ife is not a value because we choose it, but rather because of what it is." As such, he maintains, it is mistaken to believe that "there can be no obligation without the choice to live."²⁸ In his view, it is rather the other way around: admitting that a choice is needed opens the door for subjectivism, as well as opting out of the moral game. Rasmussen, we might say, favors choice/obligation incompatibilism, and seeks to save obligation by throwing out choice.

Rand? ed. Nathaniel Branden and Barbara Branden (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 27.

²⁶ Darryl Wright, "Reasoning about Ends: Life as a Value in Ayn Rand's Ethics," in *Metaethics, Egoism, and Virtue: Studies in Ayn Rand's Normative Theory*, ed. Allan Gotthelf and James G. Lennox (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), p. 26.

²⁷ Irfan Khawaja, "Review: Tara Smith's *Viable Values: A Study of Life as the Root and Reward of Morality*: A Discussion," *Reason Papers* 26 (Summer 2003), p. 83.

²⁸ Rasmussen, "Rand on Obligation and Value," pp. 76 and 74.

There are two issues at stake here. The first issue is whether or not this is a proper interpretation of Rand. According to Rasmussen, it is a proper interpretation, since in his view, “the choice to live,” as Rand uses the expression, refers not to a choice that is necessary for life to be valuable, but rather to a choice or a commitment that we need to make in order to carry out what we ought to do independently of this choice. I believe this is a mistaken interpretation of Rand, and I believe a convincing argument against Rasmussen’s interpretation has been offered by Allan Gotthelf.²⁹ Since my main concern in this article is value theory, however, rather than interpretation of Rand, I will not discuss this issue further. Let me instead assess the second issue at stake, the philosophical soundness of Rasmussen’s argument.

Although my own position, as will become clear, is similar to Rasmussen’s in several respects, I do not find his arguments convincing as they stand. Rasmussen speaks at length of the close relationship between life and values, and he recapitulates points (1) through (3) in Section 3 above.

The first new (or semi-new) argument presented by Rasmussen is that the ultimate value is “set by our nature” because “metaphysically, life is . . . an end in itself: a value gained and kept by a constant process of action.”³⁰ This, however, is macrobiology, not normative theory, and it remains unclear how the biological root of value, by itself, can issue binding obligations. Macrobiologically, it is true that life exists for its own sake. If we take for granted the biological teleology favored by Rand, life (in an inclusive sense that includes reproduction) is roughly the *telos* of our actions.³¹ Moreover, there seems to be no further *telos* to which life is the means. Such an argument, however, is doomed to fail as an argument for life’s being the ultimate value in an ethically relevant sense. If our *non-volitional* actions are bound to aim toward life, this is irrelevant, since it is not the case that the right thing to do is that to which our body prompts us. If our *volitional* actions are bound to aim toward life, we have psychological egoism, which not only fails to support the desired conclusion, but is incompatible with it. Gotthelf advances a similar line of argument against Rasmussen.³²

Rasmussen’s second argument is that “[c]hoice is not the cause of the ultimate value of life, but life as the ultimate end is the cause—in the sense of creating the need for—the activity that is choice.”³³ This is true, but trivial. It

²⁹ Allan Gotthelf, “The Choice to Value,” in *Metaethics, Egoism, and Virtue*, ed. Gotthelf and Lennox, pp. 33-46.

³⁰ Rasmussen, “Rand on Obligation and Value,” pp. 78 and 76.

³¹ See Harry Binswanger, “Life-Based Teleology and the Foundations of Ethics,” *The Monist* 75, no. 1 (1992), pp. 84-103; and Harry Binswanger, *The Biological Basis of Teleological Concepts* (Los Angeles, CA: Ayn Rand Institute Press, 1990).

³² Gotthelf, “The Choice to Value,” p. 39.

³³ Rasmussen, “Rand on Obligation and Value,” p. 77.

is true that in order to live, we must choose certain actions before other actions, and we must also (at least implicitly) make the decision to remain alive and pursue values. This, however, does not settle the issue of what is ultimately valuable.

A similar problem is present in David Kelley's rendering of Rand's argument:

In regard to point (ii),³⁴ Rand observed that *all* living organisms are capable of initiating goal-directed action, unlike rocks, rivers, and other inanimate things, which act mechanically in response to outside forces. In regard to point (iii), she observed that life versus death is the fundamental alternative that living organisms face, because it is the alternative of existing or not existing—than which you can't get more fundamental. In light of points (ii) and (iii), an organism's own life is the only thing that can be an ultimate value for it.³⁵

This argument is invalid, for it does not follow from the premises laid out by Kelley that life is the only thing that can be an ultimate value. What Kelley does is first to recapitulate Rasmussen, and then add the fact that the alternative of life and death is the most fundamental alternative we face. Rand presents the latter point as follows:

There is only one fundamental alternative in the universe: existence or nonexistence—and it pertains to a single class of entities: to living organisms. The existence of inanimate matter is unconditional, the existence of life is not: it depends on a specific course of action. Matter is indestructible, it changes its forms, but it cannot cease to exist.³⁶

Adding this, however, does not suffice. It is true that all particular values—whatever they are—exist on the side of life and not on the side of death. This, however, shows only that values *presuppose* life. Moreover, the fact that we face an alternative in this regard does not solve the problem of

³⁴ Kelley refers to three enumerated points; see David Kelley, "Choosing Life," accessed online at: <http://www.atlassociety.org/choosing-life>:

- (i) A value is a goal, something that is sought.
- (ii) A value requires a valuer capable of initiating action for the goal.
- (iii) The valuer must face an alternative: success or failure in achieving the goal must make a difference; achieving the goal must confer some benefit on the valuer and failure must bring some loss.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 15.

ultimate value. This point is well captured by Wright, who writes, “By definition, an alternative presents one with two or more possible pathways, but the mere existence of multiple pathways does not usually settle the question of which one of them an agent ought to take; on the contrary, it usually *raises* this question.”³⁷

A possible counter-argument could be that what Kelley presents is not a deductive argument, but an inductive argument. As far as I can see, however, Kelley draws no inductive generalization. As such, I believe that both Rasmussen’s and Kelley’s arguments fail; the choice to live cannot be seen as superfluous to the justification of the principle that life is the ultimate value.

b. The argument from performative contradiction (Nathaniel Branden)

Branden acknowledges that ethics rests on a choice, yet argues that this does not jeopardize its objectivity and binding force. He does this by arguing that as long as one acts and values, “*not to hold man’s life as one’s standard of moral judgment is to be guilty of a logical contradiction.*”³⁸

Unfortunately, Branden does not present this argument in detail. Rasmussen does, however, and although Rasmussen’s aim is to reject Branden’s argument in favor of his own incompatibilism, he sketches Branden’s argument charitably. Rasmussen writes: “If life is the basic value that makes all other values possible, including even one’s valuing not to live, then a person who prefers not to live is implicitly accepting the value of life.”³⁹ He continues: “If it is true that logically one cannot value anything without valuing that which makes such valuation possible, and if life is the very thing that makes valuation possible, then the value ‘life’ is implicit in any choice or valuation a person makes, and thus in making *any* choice, one chooses to live.”⁴⁰ If this is the case, it follows that when one acts, one chooses life. Acting against life, then, is acting in a way that defies the purpose one has accepted by acting. As such, to act against life is to engage in a performative contradiction.

For the sake of argument, I will take for granted that Branden is right in claiming that every agent who chooses to act does, at least to some extent, value his life. An agent who acts has chosen to act, which implies valuing acting, which implies valuing life for the reason that life is constituted by actions. What weakens Branden’s argument, however, is that to the extent one can say that all valuing presupposes valuing life, one speaks of “valuing life”

³⁷ Wright, “Reasoning about Ends: Life as a Value in Ayn Rand’s Ethics,” p. 23.

³⁸ Branden, “The Moral Revolution in *Atlas Shrugged*,” in *Who Is Ayn Rand?* ed. Branden and Branden, p. 26.

³⁹ Rasmussen, “Rand on Obligation and Value,” p. 72.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

in a much weaker sense than Branden needs for his argument to be effective. In order to avoid contradiction, it is only required that the agent values his life to *some* extent. It is not required that he holds his life as his ultimate value. As such, a man who acts for any goal other than enhancing life—say, he is a hedonist, and aims at maximizing his long-term pleasure—could say that there is no contradiction in his actions, since of course, he values life. Indeed, he would probably say that he values life passionately. He does not, however, hold it as his ultimate value. If he says this and puts his theory into practice, one can argue against him, but one will need to do so on grounds other than an alleged performative contradiction inherent in his actions. So even though we should perhaps grant that Branden’s argument is effective against a nihilist who rejects all values,⁴¹ it fails as an argument against competing value theories.

A variant of this argument could be that if one does not choose life, one in effect chooses death, since everything but life is death. If one chooses death, moreover, one does not need values at all since, as Rand notes, “nature will take its course.”⁴² Such an argument fails for the same reason that the above argument fails, however, since it is wrong to assume that not choosing A as one’s ultimate value means that one chooses the opposite of A as one’s ultimate value. If this premise were true, a hedonist—who holds that pleasure is the ultimate value—would be right in claiming that Rand’s theory, in choosing something other than pleasure as the ultimate value, is tantamount to “choosing pain.” This is not a fair criticism of Rand, and the criticism is not fair the other way either, since a hedonist does not hold death as his ultimate value. A hedonist, though he disagrees with Rand, probably abhors death, seeing it as a fundamental threat to everything he values. After all, every pleasure, like every value, exists on the side of life. Accordingly, we should acknowledge that life can be (and is) an important value for many value theories. To the extent that it is, the argument from performative contradiction does not work.

c. *The argument from axiomatcity (Irfan Khawaja)*

Khawaja argues that we should understand “the binding force of an ultimate value by analogy with the binding force of a logical axiom.” He suggests this analogy since, as he states, “an axiom can be thoroughly conditional in its binding force without being either escapable or arbitrary.”⁴³ This, moreover, seems to be exactly what we are looking for in arguing for a binding ultimate value. What Khawaja sets out to argue is that although

⁴¹ This can also be doubted. A performative contradiction need perhaps not be a problem for a nihilist.

⁴² Rand, “Causality versus Duty,” in Rand, *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 99.

⁴³ Khawaja, “Review: Tara Smith’s *Viable Values*,” p. 84.

morality is conditional on the choice to live, this does not mean that the choice is escapable or arbitrary, and as such, that it is, *ipso facto*, binding.⁴⁴

Drawing the parallel between justifying axioms and justifying the choice to live, Khawaja appeals to Aristotle's Principle of Non-Contradiction,⁴⁵ which states that a thing cannot both be and not be at the same time and in the same respect. This principle, Khawaja notes, cannot be justified in the sense that it is possible to *prove* it. It is also, in some sense, possible to abandon it. At the same time, however, this principle is neither "optional" nor "arbitrary." The reason why is that anyone who opposes the principle must take it for granted in his opposition, so in any attempt to refute the principle, the principle is reaffirmed. The principle of non-contradiction is a presupposition for all reasoning. Therefore, the only way to abandon the axiom is not to reason at all. A non-reasoner cannot make a counter-argument, however, so as long as we reason, we are bound by the axiom. Linking this to the choice to live, Khawaja writes:

As a matter of non-prescriptive fact, life can only be kept in existence by a constant process of self-sustaining action. Moreover, life is unique in this respect: it's the underlying generator of practical requirements that explains why there are practical requirements at all, themselves requiring self-sustaining action. [So life is the ultimate value.]⁴⁶

As in the case of Kelley, the conclusion does not follow. Neither does it help when Khawaja further argues that the choice to live is "escapable in the sense that one can, in principle, fully opt out of the task of aiming at one's self-preservation," but that it is escapable only in this sense.⁴⁷ Here, Khawaja's argument suffers from the same problem as Branden's: He constructs a false alternative by suggesting that to hold anything but life as one's ultimate value implies not valuing life at all. Since Khawaja offers no further argument, I believe he fails to show that there is an important parallel to be drawn between the choice to live and the axiom of non-contradiction. Gottlieb presents a similar criticism of Khawaja. Gottlieb writes that contrary to axiomatic facts,

⁴⁴ Tara Smith can perhaps be interpreted as holding the same view. See Tara Smith, *Viable Values: A Study of Life as the Root and Reward of Morality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), p. 107. I agree with Khawaja, however, that based on *Viable Values*, it is hard to say where Smith stands, for she does not address this issue head on; see Khawaja, "Review: Tara Smith's *Viable Values*," p. 84.

⁴⁵ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), IV.3.1005a19–b33.

⁴⁶ Khawaja, "Review: Tara Smith's *Viable Values*," p. 86.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

“moral obligations (‘shoulds’) are not categorical or intrinsic aspects of reality”; as such, “there is no such thing as discovering the obligatoriness of the choice to live as there is discovering the truth of a metaphysical or epistemological axiom.”⁴⁸ This is another way to explain why there need be no contradiction involved in choosing an ultimate value other than life.

Khawaja does suggest that it might be instructive to look to the ways in which Rand’s view on axioms is distinct from Aristotle’s in order to see how the choice to live is axiomatic. I doubt, however, that the difference between Rand and Aristotle in this respect is relevant. If Khawaja thinks it is, he should explain how.

d. The argument from denying the applicability of “optionality” (Allan Gotthelf)

The last argument that I shall discuss is presented by Gotthelf. He is concerned both to show that Rasmussen’s interpretation of Rand is mistaken and to offer a separate way out of the problem of subjectivity. My discussion addresses the latter concern.

Gotthelf argues, contra Rasmussen, that the choice to live is not a *necessary* choice. He writes: “When one asks what facts necessitate a choice, one can mean only one of two things: what causally necessitates the choice or what morally necessitates the choice. In either sense, the answer from an Objectivist standpoint is ‘*Nothing* necessitates.’”⁴⁹ The reason for this, Gotthelf explains, is that on the first reading of “necessitates,” human volition falsifies it. On the second reading, no moral necessitation is possible with regard to the choice to live, since morality first arises after the choice is made. As such, asking what morally necessitates the choice to live, granted Rand’s context, is tantamount to asking for the weight of a number: It is the application of a concept to a context in which the concept has no meaning.

The fact that the choice to live is not necessary, however, does not imply, in Gotthelf’s view, that it is optional. His argument for this is that in the same way that “necessary” is an inapplicable concept in the present context, so is “optional.”⁵⁰ Gotthelf presents three arguments for this.

His first argument is that for optionality to be an applicable concept, there must be an overarching evaluative principle by reference to which two possible outcomes of a choice, although different in nature, are identical or roughly identical in worth. Gotthelf’s example is the optionality present in the choice of vanilla or chocolate ice cream. Provided that one should buy ice

⁴⁸ Gotthelf, “The Choice to Value,” p. 45.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 43.

⁵⁰ Gotthelf claims that what is true for “optional” is also true for “arbitrary,” “irrational,” and “arational”; see *ibid.* He does not, however, provide reasons for this being the case other than for “optional.” I assume that Gotthelf supposes that his argument generalizes.

cream, and provided that one has no relevant allergies, both the vanilla and the chocolate option will serve one's purposes, and as such, they are "optional values." Such is not the case, however, with regard to the choice to live. The choice to live is prior to any evaluative principle. As such, and even though the choice to live is not necessary, it is not optional either.

I find this argument unconvincing, for Gotthelf uses the concept "optional" in a problematically restrictive sense when he equates it with Rand's concept of the "optional" as used in the case of optional values. In Rand's use, optionality does indeed seem to presuppose a further evaluative principle, but it is not clear that Rand's use of the term exhausts the term's meaning. It seems plain that we face an option when we are to choose whether we shall hold life or something else as our ultimate goal, and in this wider sense, the choice to live is undeniably optional (else this debate would not arise). As such, Gotthelf's first argument does not rule out the possibility that the choice to live is optional in the relevant sense.

The second argument offered by Gotthelf is that under normal circumstances, you are—when given an option—present after you have made the choice. With regard to choosing life you are not present after choosing not to live, and thus it seems that the choice to live is not optional in any normal sense of the term "optional."

I believe that both of the central premises in this argument can be contested. First, it can be contested that it is a requirement for optionality that the agent shall be present regardless of which option he chooses. One could imagine cases of euthanasia where, granted the low quality of life, choosing to live or choosing to die seems optional. If so, it could be that although we are usually alive after having made optional choices (this has an obvious explanation), survival is not a formal requirement for the application of the concept "optional"—it is just an often-present characteristic of such choices.

Regardless of this, however, the argument fails because it takes for granted that not choosing life as one's ultimate value means choosing (imminent) death. This is a mistake, since one can commit and adhere to a wide range of ethical views without being wiped out of existence; even if one does not choose life as one's ultimate value, one can be present after that choice is made. Both Kantians and utilitarians, it seems, stay alive. As such, I believe that both Gotthelf's first and second arguments are insufficient.

Gotthelf's third argument seems unclear to me, and I am not certain that I fully grasp it. For this reason, I will quote the argument in full before examining it. Gotthelf writes:

Third, an optional choice is a choice of the normal, non-basic (or nonfundamental) type: it is a situation in which you consciously reflect on both options, and if necessary deliberate about them—a situation in which you initiate a process of *evaluation*. But if you do that in the case of a choice to live, if you consciously choose to think about the issue, you are asking its relationship to your already existing ultimate value. Barring the cases of justifiable suicide referred to by Rasmussen,

where the ultimate value is actually unachievable . . . , once you ask whether you *should* continue to live, i.e., should take the actions your continued survival requires, there is no option. The only answer, on any reasonable interpretation of Objectivism, is *yes, of course*. Have I reason to take the actions which my continued existence as a rational being requires? Yes, precisely because my continued existence requires them. A basic (or fundamental) choice not to live is not a deliberated choice; it is simply a shutting down. And if it should be the case psychologically that no one reaches that stage without first, across some time, consciously acting against his life (an issue on which I reserve judgment), then it follows that no one can exit the realm of morality guiltlessly. But once he closes down completely, he is, from that point on, as I see it, outside the moral realm.⁵¹

This paragraph initially restates the first two arguments. Thereafter, Gotthelf states that, barring possible extreme cases of justified suicide, the only answer to the question of whether one should live, is “*yes, of course*.” This is not argued for, and Gotthelf’s query and response—“Have I reason to take the actions which my continued existence as a rational being requires? Yes, precisely because my continued existence requires them”—are not an argument, but a restatement. Since I see no further argument presented, I fail to see how Gotthelf saves Rand’s theory from the problem of subjectivity.

As will become clear below, however, I am in partial agreement with Gotthelf, especially taking into account another claim of his, namely, that we have “all the reason in the world” to live.⁵² This claim implies that there are in fact reasons for living, and that once these reasons are identified, we are given reason to pursue values exactly because our continued existence requires them. As it stands, however, Gotthelf’s argument is not convincing, and it remains to be explained why one cannot, without making a mistake, choose something other than life as one’s ultimate value. This includes choosing death, and more interestingly, something else as one’s ultimate value. As such, the problem of subjectivity remains in need of a solution.

5. My Solution: The Value of Happiness

Let me preface my own suggested solution to the problem of subjectivity by stating that I agree with Gotthelf, Khawaja, and Branden (contra Rasmussen) that ethics rests on a pre-rational choice or, at least, on a pre-rational move or a pre-rational acknowledgement.⁵³ Moreover, I agree that this pre-rational choice, move, or acknowledgement is neither optional nor

⁵¹ Gotthelf, “The Choice to Value,” p. 44.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵³ I speak of “pre-rational” in a wide sense, to include “pre-moral.”

arbitrary nor escapable. At the same time, I agree with Rasmussen (contra Gotthelf, Khawaja, and Branden) that there is something to life that makes it valuable by virtue of what it is, rather than by virtue of our choice to value it.

The solution for which I shall argue is that choosing to live is conditionally rational: it is rational insofar as certain conditions are met, irrational insofar as these conditions are not met. As such, I contest Tara Smith's claim that "the choice to live is not subject to rational appraisal."⁵⁴ The condition on which the rationality of the choice to live depends, I argue, is the prospect for happiness for the agent making the choice. It is rational for an agent to choose to live if and only if she has reason to believe that life will bring more happiness than unhappiness; irrational if and only if she has reason to believe that life will bring more unhappiness than happiness.

One can imagine two immediate challenges to this proposed solution. The first challenge is that in treating the choice to live as something to be judged by reference to a further standard, I do not approach a real solution; rather, I move the problem one additional step in the regress. The second challenge is that in holding happiness as the justification for living, I deny rather than affirm that life is the ultimate value, and give in to a form of subjectivism and emotionalism that is fundamentally at odds with Rand's position. I will answer both of these challenges below. First, however, let me motivate my view.

a. Happiness as the ultimate value

If we take a step back from philosophical theorizing, and examine first-hand our lives and how we assess them, it seems plain that some lives are more worth living than others. A life of happiness and excitement, for example, seems more worth living than a life of suffering. It also seems that if one's suffering is sufficiently severe, and there are few prospects for future happiness, life might no longer be worth living. This is granted by Smith, who claims that under certain conditions, "the decision to commit suicide could also be rational."⁵⁵ If this is the case, then it seems that some features of life have the power to make it more worth living (say, friendship, love, excitement, pleasure, and health) while other features make life less worth living (say, failure, agony, pain, and disease). How can this be accounted for if life is the ultimate value? Interestingly, it is not obvious that it can. If life is the ultimate value, then how can some lives be more worth living than others, granted that "worth," like every other evaluative concept, is parasitic on "value" and "value" is parasitic on "life"? Arguably, a longer life would be better than a shorter life, but this seems not to exhaust what we are looking for. It seems that a happy life that is one day shorter than a life in misery is still a better life—but this, one might object, seems to be outside of what the

⁵⁴ Smith, *Viable Values*, p. 107.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

theory that life is the ultimate value can explain. The problem Rand's theory faces in this respect is similar to the problem hedonists face in seeking evaluatively to differentiate between "valuable" and "disvaluable" pleasures. If pleasure is that which is ultimately valuable, there cannot (ultimately) be "valuable" and "disvaluable" pleasures, since if there were, something other than pleasure would be the ultimate value. A hedonist who speaks of "valuable" and "disvaluable" pleasures uses those concepts outside of the context in which he is justified in using them, and commits the fallacy of the stolen concept. But if a hedonist cannot discriminate between valuable and disvaluable pleasures, how can someone who holds life as the ultimate value discriminate between valuable and disvaluable lives? How can it be, granted that life is the ultimate value, that happiness and joy are so important?

There seem to be two main ways to account for the value of happiness within Rand's view that life is the ultimate value, both of which I think are unsatisfactory. One way is to appeal to the fact that mental well-functioning (which Rand sometimes refers to as "psychological survival"⁵⁶), which crucially involves happiness, is vital for sustaining life. If Rand is right that our minds are our most crucial means of survival,⁵⁷ and that we must be happy and motivated for our minds to serve our lives, it is vital that we pursue happiness. Rand writes:

A chronic lack of pleasure, of any enjoyable, rewarding or stimulating experiences, produces a slow, gradual, day-by-day erosion of man's emotional vitality, which he may ignore or repress, but which is recorded by the relentless computer of his subconscious mechanism that registers an ebbing flow, then a trickle, then a few last drops of fuel—until the day when his inner motor stops and he wonders desperately why he has no desire to go on.⁵⁸

I believe that it is consistent, on the premise that life is the ultimate value, to hold happiness as an important non-ultimate value. This, however, cannot account for why happiness is important to the extent and in the way we are looking for, since appeals to psychological survival cannot explain why some lives are more worth living than others. In seeking to ground the value of happiness in psychological survival, one treats happiness as an instrumental value—as something that has value by virtue of being needed in order to support and promote life. One cannot, however, decide whether or not an

⁵⁶ See Ayn Rand, "The Goal of My Writing," in Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto* (New York: Signet, 1975), p. 169; see also Rand, "The Psycho-Epistemology of Art," in *ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

⁵⁷ See Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 21.

⁵⁸ Ayn Rand, "Our Cultural Value-Deprivation," in *The Voice of Reason: Essays in Objectivist Thought*, ed. Leonard Peikoff (New York: Penguin Plume, 1990), p. 104.

ultimate value is truly valuable by reference to whether or not an instrumental value is present. As long as we have merely argued that happiness is instrumentally valuable, we would need to accept that a life filled with unhappiness and pain is quite alright if we were only able to clench our teeth and grudgingly go on living. This, however, seems wrong, since a life of happiness—by virtue of being a life of *happiness*—undeniably is more worthwhile than a life without happiness. The harmfulness of unhappiness, in other words, seems not to be exhausted by its effects on one's survival. If this is right, we cannot appeal to the importance of psychological survival to cash out why some lives are more worth living than others, and why some lives are perhaps not worth living at all.

A second suggestion could be that I misunderstand what Rand means by "life." Perhaps life, in the context of Rand's ethics, means not only a process of self-sustaining, self-generated action (to which happiness is extrinsic), but a form of flourishing (to which happiness is intrinsic). Perhaps the goal of ethics is not life as such, but what Rand calls a life suitable for man *qua* man: a life of happiness, ambition, achievement, and so on.⁵⁹

This seems like a plausible suggestion, and Rand does often operate with an enriched understanding of "living" that includes happiness. Rand explains that life's being the ultimate value does not mean "*momentary* or a merely *physical* survival Man's survival *qua* man means the terms, methods, conditions and goals required for the survival of a rational being through the whole of his lifespan—in all those aspects of existence which are open to his choice."⁶⁰ The same point is made by Rasmussen, who states that "[t]hat which is required for man's survival *qua* man is the standard of value for a human being."⁶¹ This could explain, Rasmussen notes, why "[t]here can be times in which choosing to die is better, because there might be no chance to live a life proper to a human being."⁶² Rand herself, in a 1936 letter, wrote that "any form of swift physical annihilation is preferable to the inconceivable horror of a living death,"⁶³ "living death" presumably referring to a life without happiness, ambition, achievement, and so on.

I do not doubt that there are proper and improper lives. I do, however, doubt if this position is open to Rand, granted the macrobiological rationale offered in support of her view. The reason why is that it is unclear what the concepts "proper" or "*qua* man" refer to in this context, since "proper" and

⁵⁹ Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," pp. 24-25.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 24.

⁶¹ Rasmussen, "Rand on Obligation and Value," pp. 76-77.

⁶² Ibid, p. 84 n. 9.

⁶³ Ayn Rand, "Letter to John Temple Graves" (July 5, 1936), in *Letters of Ayn Rand*, ed. Michael Berliner (New York: Penguin Plume, 1997), p. 33.

“*qua* man”—just as “worth,” which I discussed above—are parasitic on “value,” and “value,” in turn, is parasitic on “life.” Thus it seems that in order to attain the desired result of the “man *qua* man” argument, the expression “man *qua* man” must be used equivocally.

In one sense of the statement that man must live a life proper to “man *qua* man,” the statement is obviously true. Man has a certain nature, and if he is to live, he must live in accordance with this nature. If he tries to live life not as a man, but as a snail, a hippopotamus, or a bed bug, he will fail to perform the actions that his nature requires, if he is to go on living.

This is uncontroversial, however, and seems not to exhaust what Rand means by the claim that man must live a life proper for man *qua* man. Rand seems to mean something stronger, namely, that within the realm of lives open to and possible for man, some lives are better than others—not just that some lives are impossible.

Here is the equivocation: In justifying the “*qua* man” hypothesis, Rand seems to use the descriptive sense of “man *qua* man,” stating that a man must live in accordance with his nature in order to live. When applied, however, the expression is used in the prescriptive sense, to point to certain ways—among those open to him—in which he *should* live and certain other ways in which he *should not* live. Rand leaps, or so it seems, from a description to a prescription—and this prescription seems to lie outside of what can be justified by the strict doctrine that life is the ultimate value.⁶⁴ I think it is easy to accept Rand’s theory that life is the ultimate value—and to accept in conjunction with it the view that happiness is intrinsically more valuable than unhappiness—without asking whether the latter follows from or is consistent with the former. On the standard understanding of Rand’s theory of ultimate value, I believe they are inconsistent. In another understanding, however—an understanding which grants that in one sense, *happiness is the ultimate value*—the problem is resolved.

In order to justify this, let me start by re-examining one of the cases discussed above: that of the indestructible robot. As we saw, Rand uses the example of an indestructible robot—“which moves and acts, but which cannot be affected by anything, which cannot be changed in any respect, which cannot be damaged, injured or destroyed”—as an example of a being that “would not be able to have any values.”⁶⁵ Rand’s aim with this thought-experiment seems to be to illustrate that without the fundamental alternative of life or death, there can be no values.

⁶⁴ A similar objection has been raised by Michael Huemer in his “Critique of ‘The Objectivist Ethics,’” accessed online at: <http://home.sprynet.com/~owl1/rand5.htm>. Huemer describes “*qua* man” as a “fudge word” that can be bent to “mean whatever it is convenient for [it] to mean at a particular time.”

⁶⁵ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 16.

Insofar as this is Rand's aim, her thought-experiment fails. It fails because it seems that we can have destructible robots without values and indestructible robots with values. We can see this if we carefully examine the example.

Imagine, first, that we have a robot that is destructible, and that must (and can) act in certain ways in order to avoid destruction. Do we know, solely from this description of the robot, that the robot has a reason to act in some ways rather than others? I believe we do not. For practical reasons to enter the picture, the robot would need something more, like the ability to feel happiness and unhappiness, joy and suffering. Without such an ability, none of its actions would seem to be of significance to the robot. Its actions would merely be various instances of moving stuff around, and its life—the aggregate of its stuff-moving activities—would also be an instance of moving stuff around. It is not clear how engaging in stuff-moving, however, would have any meaning or significance to the robot, and thus it seems hard to grasp why its life would be of any value to it. After all, it would not *care*. If this is right, then it seems that we can have a destructible robot without values. If we can have a destructible robot without values, moreover, destructibility (in conjunction with the option of avoiding destruction by acting in a certain way) is insufficient for value.

In order to illustrate that destructibility is not only insufficient, but also unnecessary, we need an example of a robot that is *indestructible* yet has values. I believe that we can find such an example, if we imagine that the robot is sentient. Imagine, therefore, a robot that cannot go out of existence, but that has a full repertoire of human emotions. It can feel happiness and joy, agony and pain. It will, for example, experience strong sadness if its house burns down. Would this robot, in spite of never being able to go out of existence, have a reason not to burn down its house? Would its house be a value to the robot? It seems plain that it would.

An objection to this thought-experiment could be that a robot that does not confront the alternative of life or death could not be sentient either. Sentience, it could be argued, has the function of prompting us toward life-promoting actions, and without the option of life or death, the pleasure/pain mechanism would be purposeless. My reply to this objection is that the purposelessness of sentience does not imply the impossibility of sentience—and as such, that there is nothing formally wrong with the thought-experiment. In a functional and evolutionary sense, it is true that the *telos* of sentience is to promote life and reproduction, so if we all suddenly became indestructible, sentience would (to the extent that it is biologically costly and thus taxes resources that could be used for reproduction) gradually wither away. This does not, however, have any impact on the metaphysical possibility of a being that is indestructible yet experiences happiness and suffering.

Alternatively—and this is sufficient for the present purposes—we can imagine a normal human being who is placed in a position where none of her actions can affect her life, and not because she is metaphysically indestructible, but because her range of action has been severely restrained.

Even under such conditions, it seems that her actions would have value-significance for her, insofar as she is sentient and her actions affect her hedonic level, regardless of whether the end result of her actions could promote or destroy her life.

Here is a scenario to consider.⁶⁶ Imagine that you are about to undergo surgery and you are given the option of buying anesthetics for \$5. If you choose to do so, you will feel a tiny pin prick, fall asleep, and wake up again after the surgery. If you choose not to buy anesthetics, the surgery will be excruciatingly painful. The end result, however, will not be affected by what you choose, since if you do not buy anesthetics, the nurses will skillfully strap you to the hospital bed so that you cannot move a limb, and the surgeon will use earplugs so that your screams will not disturb him. Apart from the excruciating pain, therefore, nothing hinges on whether or not you buy the anesthetics. (Imagine, for the sake of the thought-experiment, that you will not suffer any psychological problems after the operation.) Granted this, would you have a reason to spend \$5 of your savings on anesthetics, even if this affects nothing but your pain level? It seems plain that you would. At the same time, it seems plain that in the relevant sense, you would be in the same situation as a sentient indestructible robot.

We can also think of other examples. Imagine, for instance, that you know that you will be executed tomorrow at noon. You are given a choice, however, regarding the execution method. You can choose between being executed with a lethal injection—which will make you die in ten minutes—or by crucifixion—which will make you die in two days. Which execution method should you choose? It seems plain that you should choose lethal injection, even if you get a longer life by choosing crucifixion, and the reason why you should choose lethal injection seems to be that crucifixion is extremely painful, while lethal injection is much less painful.⁶⁷

As a last example, imagine that you have caught a vicious disease. The disease will kill you in two years, but it will not be painful until the last days before you die. You then get the option of buying a medicine that halts the development of the disease. It costs 75% of your salary, so buying the medicine will make you very poor; it has bad side-effects, so you will feel constantly nauseated; and it will only extend your life by two to three months. Should you buy the medicine? Here, it seems that if the poverty and the nausea are sufficiently bad, you should not buy the medicine. Instead, you should enjoy your last two years in health with enough money to live comfortably—even if this means saying “no” to two to three additional months of living.

If these examples illustrate what I believe they do, it seems that sentience is crucial to value—perhaps so crucial that what is ultimately

⁶⁶ I owe this example to Ivar Labukt.

⁶⁷ Thanks to Alexander R. Cohen for suggesting this example.

valuable is not life as such, but a certain kind of mental state—happiness or enjoyment—and that what is ultimately disvaluable is not death as such, but unhappiness or suffering. Can this be right?

b. Challenge #1

The first challenge raised above was that positing that happiness rather than life has ultimate value, cannot be a solution to the problem of ultimate value, since it merely moves the problem one step ahead in the regress. Rather than facing the problem of justifying life as the ultimate value, the objection states, we would—if we suggest that happiness is the ultimate value—face a similar problem of justifying happiness instead, with all of the same problems still ahead.

Within the limits of this article, I cannot expect to settle the dispute. I will be content with explaining why it is argumentatively less costly to justify the ultimate value of happiness than the ultimate value of life.⁶⁸

The first reason is that the view that happiness is the ultimate value seems to be much more in line with both how we view our lives and how we view imaginary cases. It seems very clear that there are lives worth living and lives not worth living. It seems far from clear, however—keeping all else equal—that there is happiness worth having and happiness not worth having. Unless we are misguided in holding such priorities, it seems that happiness is a value according to which life should be evaluated.

The second reason concerns the prerequisites for being committed to values at all. I concede that regardless of whether happiness or life is that which is ultimately worth having, a pre-rational move or a pre-rational acknowledgement is required to be bound by values. There is a crucial asymmetry, however, between the pre-rational move required for life to be the ultimate value and the pre-rational move required for happiness to be the ultimate value.

If life is the ultimate value, this pre-rational move is—in Rand’s words—a “choice.” “Choice” is an apt word, since what one faces is genuinely a choice: Among all the things that it is possible to hold as one’s ultimate value, one is urged to choose one among these, namely, life. In the case of happiness, however, it seems that one would not make a choice, but rather, acknowledge a fact. I, for one, do not *choose* that happiness is better for me than suffering is. I *acknowledge* that happiness is better than suffering, and granted the kind of being I am, I cannot acknowledge otherwise. This is why there is a sense in which I side with Rasmussen, who holds that there is something intrinsic to that which is ultimately valuable that makes it valuable, and that this value does not hinge upon an act of choice. Of course, I am forced to admit that if someone truly does not acknowledge or experience the fact that happiness is better than suffering, he or she does not enter the realm

⁶⁸ I discuss this in considerably more detail in my doctoral dissertation, “Hedonism and the Mystery of Value” (PhD Diss., University of Oslo, forthcoming).

of values and could not be argued into doing so. Stepping outside of the realm of values, however, seems harder in the case of happiness than in the case of life as the ultimate value, since in the case of happiness, the bar for entering the realm of values has been lowered. One would need to be a metaphysically different being from the one I am in order to be neutral with respect to happiness and suffering. Thus, if happiness is the ultimate value, even the life-hating terrorist in Wright's example would be bound by values, insofar as he is able to experience happiness and suffering, and he sees that happiness is better than suffering. Only if he truly does not experience that happiness is better than suffering could we say that he is beyond good and evil.⁶⁹ Since the goodness of happiness is less escapable than the goodness of life, the view that happiness is the ultimate value seems more apt at ending the regress than does the view that life is the ultimate value. So much for the first challenge.⁷⁰

c. Challenge #2

The second challenge is that the view that happiness is the ultimate value, rather than being a vindication of Rand's view, constitutes surrender to the very emotionalism and subjectivism that Rand attacks. I believe that this is false and, in fact, that the view that happiness is the ultimate value—in one specific sense of that statement—is compatible with, and might be, Rand's view.

Let me start by surveying some examples of where happiness is treated as an ultimate value in Rand's writings and in the secondary literature on Rand. In *The Virtue of Selfishness*, Rand seems to hold that happiness is the ultimate reason for living when she writes, "It is by experiencing happiness that one lives one's life, in any hour, year or the whole of it. And when one experiences the kind of pure happiness that is an end in itself—the kind that

⁶⁹ This is so, I believe, because the view that happiness is the ultimate value is more in line with a Humean moral psychology than is the view that life is the ultimate value. Humean moral psychology holds that to get motivation into a chain of reasons, one must ultimately appeal neither to a state of affairs in the world nor to causal relations in this world, but to an emotional state or to some form of valenced experience. If one believes that happiness is that which ultimately benefits an agent, one holds that that which ultimately supplies us with reasons for action is indeed a form of hedonically valenced experience. If life is the ultimate value (in the strict sense), the ultimate value is a certain state of affairs (the functioning of the organism according to certain ideals). This suggests that the view that happiness is the ultimate value is compatible with a Humean view of moral motivation, whereas the view that life is the ultimate value is not.

⁷⁰ Clearly, more work must be done in order to ground securely the identification of ultimate value with happiness or enjoyment. One path to doing so could be to use Rand's methodology, and seek to establish how our concepts of "good" and "bad," "valuable" and "disvaluable," have their source not in observing biological processes, but in experiencing enjoyment and suffering. That, however, is a project for another occasion.

makes one think: ‘*This is worth living for*’.”⁷¹ Branden, in the same collection of essays, writes, “Through the state of enjoyment, man experiences the value of life, the sense that life is worth living, worth struggling to maintain.”⁷² That happiness gives life value is also conceded by Wright, who claims, “To find one’s life worth living, then, must be to experience the process of living—the activities that define and give substance to one’s life—as intrinsically motivating, as a source of pleasure and fulfillment.” Wright concludes by saying (giving the most explicit formulation of this point in the secondary literature on Rand), “Of course, it is primarily for the psychological rewards of living that we do want to live; merely soldiering on as a physical organism has no independent value for us.”⁷³

Smith, after having argued that there is no rational answer to the question of what makes life worth living, claims that “[m]y point is not to deny that life is worthwhile,” and writes that “the choice depends on what kind of experience a given individual finds satisfactory.” This seems to allow for the possibility that we can judge whether or not a life is worth living by reference to a further standard, and later in the same paragraph, Smith writes that we can judge the value of life according to “the prevalence of unhappiness or pain in the world.”⁷⁴

Kelley seems to embrace the same position when discussing a poster listing “50 Reasons for Living,” where these reasons include things such as balloons, ice cream, hugs, Thanksgiving, and flowers. He uses this example to illustrate that you cannot reason someone into choosing life other than ostensibly, by pointing to the different things that bring happiness—just as the poster does. The interesting question to pose in response to Kelley’s position is the following: How could such pointing make sense, if the value of life does not hinge on happiness? In both the view that life, in the biological sense, is the ultimate value and in the view that happiness is the ultimate value, it is true that one could never non-ostensively reason a person into choosing to live. If life, in the biological sense, were the ultimate value, however, it is not clear how the ostensive would be of any more help than the non-ostensive. If the value of life does not hinge upon happiness, how could an act of pointing to elicitors of happiness help to justify choosing life? It seems that in the strict sense of the doctrine that life is the ultimate value, the choice to live would have to be made without regard for the experiential content of life. These hints from Rand, Branden, Smith, Wright, and Kelley,

⁷¹ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 29.

⁷² Nathaniel Branden, “The Psychology of Pleasure,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 61.

⁷³ Wright, “Evaluative Concepts and Objective Values: Rand on Moral Objectivity,” pp. 174 and 176.

⁷⁴ Smith, *Viable Values*, p. 107.

on the contrary, point toward the view that happiness is what benefits us as agents and makes our lives worth living. How, if at all, can this be reconciled with the view that life is the ultimate value?

One way to reconcile the view that life is the ultimate value with the view that happiness is the ultimate value could be to suggest that Rand means the same thing by life and happiness. If she does, the claims that “life is the ultimate value” and “happiness is the ultimate value” would be equivalent. This, however, seems not to be Rand’s view. Happiness, in her view, is a state of consciousness, specifically, “the state of consciousness that results from the achievement of one’s values.” Life, by contrast, she defines as “a process of self-generated, self-sustaining action.”⁷⁵ Although life and happiness are closely related, they cannot be identical, since they refer to things with different ontological status—happiness is a state of consciousness, while life is a process.

Another way to reconcile the view that life is the ultimate value with the view that happiness is the ultimate value could be to suggest that the expression “ultimate value” is ambiguous. “Ultimate value” may have two different meanings, so that in one sense, life is the ultimate value, in another sense, happiness is the ultimate value. I think that this is a more promising path, and to see why, we need to look at an often-neglected distinction drawn by Rand between “purpose” (or “ultimate purpose”) and “standard of value.” Rand explains, “The difference between a ‘standard’ and a ‘purpose’ [is that] a ‘standard’ is an abstract principle that serves as a measurement or gauge to guide man’s choices and actions in the achievement of a concrete, specific purpose.” Adding substance to her concepts, Rand writes that “Happiness can properly be the *purpose* of ethics, but *not* the *standard*.” The “standard of value,” she writes, is “life.”⁷⁶

This statement is worth a pause for careful consideration. What Rand introduces is a separation between our ultimate “purpose,” which is happiness, and our ultimate “standard of value,” which is life. This distinction has an air of paradox to it. On the one hand, Rand claims that the purpose of life—the reason that makes it worth engaging in—is happiness. On the other hand, she claims that what we should use as our yardstick to determine whether or not a certain course of action is proper, is not happiness but *life*. How can it be that if happiness is the thing ultimately worth having for its own sake, then life is what we should ultimately pursue?

If we understand Rand’s view on the nature of happiness, though, the view does not seem as paradoxical, since on this view, it could be that even though the benefit that makes life worthwhile is happiness, what we need to

⁷⁵ Rand, “This Is John Galt Speaking,” in Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, pp. 123 and 121.

⁷⁶ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 25, 29, and 16.

do in order to reap this benefit is not to pursue happiness, but to pursue life. As we saw, happiness, according to Rand, is the state of consciousness that proceeds from the pursuit of one's values.⁷⁷ If this is correct, then happiness is causally dependent on values. To the extent that we value something, Rand holds, we will typically experience happiness after having successfully pursued it. Conversely, we will typically experience unhappiness after having failed in pursuing it. To the extent that we value our careers and our friends, therefore, we will tend to be happy when our careers go well and our friendships grow stronger, and tend to be unhappy when our careers decline and our friendships grow weaker. In Rand's formulation, "Emotions are the automatic results of man's value judgments integrated by his subconscious."⁷⁸

An implication of this view is that to the extent that we can choose between different values, we are—within certain measures—plastic with respect to what gives us emotional gratification. This seems intuitively correct. Those who favored Barack Obama in the 2012 U.S. presidential election seemed to be happy when he won. Those who favored Mitt Romney seemed not to be happy. The difference in emotional reaction, moreover, seemed to stem from the difference in their value-judgments about Obama and Romney. Because the Obama supporters judged Obama to be the superior candidate, they felt good when he won; because the Romney supporters judged Romney to be the superior candidate, they felt bad when he lost. How we feel about something, it seems, depends on how we judge it.

Explaining Rand's view on emotions, Leonard Peikoff writes, in a piece endorsed by Rand, that happiness is "not a psychological primary; it is a consequence, an *effect*, of one's previously formed value-judgments." This has an important implication for the practice of pursuing happiness. Peikoff writes: "To say, therefore, that men should determine their values by the standard of what gives them pleasure, is to say: 'Men should determine their values by the standard of whatever they already value.'" This, Peikoff observes, would be "circular," "content-less," and, ultimately, "suicidal," since it would lead us into a circle where we do nothing but pander to our own biases. Doing so, moreover, seems not to be the way to achieve happiness.⁷⁹

To illustrate this point, imagine that you had grown up being told that homosexuality is disgraceful, and had come to internalize this view, feeling disgust at the thought of a romantic relationship between two persons of the same sex. Then one day your best friend tells you he is gay. How would you react? If you were an emotionalist, in Rand's sense of the term, you would most likely condemn him. After all, what he said would be emotionally

⁷⁷ Rand, "This Is John Galt Speaking," in Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, p. 123.

⁷⁸ Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 27.

⁷⁹ Leonard Peikoff, "Why Does Objectivism Reject Ethical Hedonism?" *The Objectivist Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (February 1962), p. 7.

disturbing. The problem with condemning him, however, is that you would be condemning someone whom you have no good reason to believe has done anything wrong or who poses any threat to you. As such, condemning him might well mean throwing away a valuable friendship. It might be that if you had forced yourself to remain calm and had carefully reconsidered your views, you would have come to continue enjoying a highly rewarding friendship, and gradually, your emotions would have adjusted to your new, consciously reasoned value-judgments.

The plasticity of what gives us emotional gratification, therefore, has implications for how happiness is achieved: One does not achieve happiness merely by doing what gives one pleasant emotions. In Rand's words, "Happiness is not to be achieved at the command of emotional whims. Happiness is not the satisfaction of whatever irrational wishes you might blindly attempt to indulge."⁸⁰ If this is right, it seems that happiness can be that which ultimately benefits an agent without happiness itself being the proper evaluative standard according to which an agent should guide his actions. It might be that in order to achieve happiness, an agent must hold as his standard of value not happiness, but something external to his emotions—for example, his *life*. Perhaps holding life as one's ultimate value and acting accordingly is the best means to achieve happiness. Whether or not this is in fact true is ultimately a psychological issue, but it seems like a plausible suggestion.

In pursuing life as one's ultimate aim, one performs actions that naturally—due to our biological makeup—are both enjoyable and conducive to further enjoyment. One will also, over time, adjust one's emotions to reward what promotes one's life, and as such learn to find enjoyment in that which is conducive to further enjoyment, and one will make one's life a unified project, without contradictory values tearing one apart. This integrates well with Rand's description of happiness as "a state of non-contradictory joy."⁸¹ Indeed, by pursuing life, one pursues that which is the very source of one's happiness: one's status as a valuer. If life is a process of self-generated, self-sustaining action,⁸² then life is crucially the activity of valuing, so to value life, in an important sense, is to value valuing. To value valuing in order to achieve happiness, moreover, makes a lot of sense, if Rand is right that happiness is the "state of consciousness that proceeds from the pursuit of one's values." As such, it is not far-fetched to hold that in order to reach long-term happiness, one should hold life as one's ultimate value.

If we achieve happiness by aiming at life, this is a form of indirect teleology. Indirect teleology refers to cases where, in order to attain

⁸⁰ Rand, "This Is John Galt Speaking," in Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, p. 132.

⁸¹ Ibid. Thanks to Alexander R. Cohen for reminding me of this formulation.

⁸² Ibid., p. 121.

something, one must aim at something else. This is a fairly common form of teleology. Think, for example, of an archer who must aim above the bull's eye in order to hit it. Another example might be that of a jogger who jogs up a hillside for the health benefits this brings. Even though good health is the jogger's purpose, the jogger would not aim directly at his purpose when he jogs. When jogging, he would aim at getting up the hill. If he were to try directing his jogging by aiming for health, he would be paralyzed, and would not be able to get the health benefits he would have gotten had he managed to focus on the concrete task ahead. If this generalizes to issues involving happiness, it could be that happiness is gained as a byproduct of taking part in life-promoting activities. If so, it could plausibly be argued that although happiness is that which ultimately benefits an agent, life is the proper ultimate standard in practical reasoning. As such, it could be that although happiness is the ultimate benefit, we are—in one sense—justified in stating that life is the ultimate value, if by “ultimate value” we mean ultimate standard in practical reasoning.

This seems to be Rand's view, moreover, since she writes that “[t]he difference between a ‘standard’ and a ‘purpose’ [is that] a ‘standard’ is an abstract principle that serves as a measurement or gauge to guide man's choices and actions in the achievement of a concrete, specific purpose,” and while the “standard of value” is “life,” “[h]appiness can properly be the *purpose* of ethics, but *not* the *standard*.”⁸³ Rand also writes that “[i]t is only by accepting ‘man's life’ as one's primary and by pursuing the rational values it requires that one can achieve happiness—not by taking ‘happiness’ as some undefined, irreducible primary and then attempting to live by its guidance.”⁸⁴

6. Conclusion

It might or might not be correct that Rand uses the phrase “ultimate value” to refer to two different things: that which is ultimately worth pursuing, happiness, and that which is the standard by which we determine how to act, life. Regardless of whether or not this is in fact Rand's view, it does provide a path out of the problem of subjectivity.

The problem of subjectivity, to recapitulate, is the problem of reconciling two aspects of Rand's theory. On the one hand, Rand's theory relies on a pre-rational move, and on the other, it requires mandatoriness and objectivity. So as to clarify how accepting that happiness is the ultimate benefit can help us to solve this problem, and thus provide a justification for valuing life, let me explain how this view can rely on a pre-rational move yet retain its mandatoriness and objectivity.

The view that happiness is the ultimate benefit, and thus the ultimate reason for living, depends on a pre-rational move in the sense that it depends

⁸³ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 25 and 29.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

on the recognition of the fact that happiness is better than suffering. This move is pre-rational in the sense that one cannot reason anyone into acknowledging it (other than ostensively, by pointing). In spite of the fact that this pre-rational move is required for entering the realm of values, however, the view is mandatory for the reason that it depends on an *acknowledgement* or a *recognition* rather than on a choice. Insofar as one is a sentient being for whom happiness is better than suffering, no act of choice can remove an agent from the realm of values. The view is objective, moreover, since in any given situation, what is valuable and what is disvaluable to an agent is an objective fact. Neither the fact that happiness is mind-dependent, nor the fact that emotional-reaction patterns are plastic, threatens the objective and factual nature of what will be conducive to an agent's long-term happiness.

If this argument holds—and if it is true that in order to achieve happiness, one should hold life as one's ultimate aim in practical reasoning—it seems that we have arrived at a way to save the view that life is the ultimate value from the problem of subjectivity.

