

## Discussion Notes

### Happiness or Life, or Both: Reply to Ole Martin Moen

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#### 1. Introduction

Ole Martin Moen has mounted an interesting challenge to the foundations of the Objectivist ethics.<sup>1</sup> Unlike too many other critics, he gives an accurate and insightful statement of those foundations, especially in Section 2. Nevertheless, I am not entirely convinced by his critique of the thesis that life is the ultimate value, nor by his alternative view that happiness is the ultimate value. In this commentary, I want to address two aspects of his article: (1) the structure of Moen's argument against life as the ultimate value, and (2) his views about happiness.

#### 2. The Structure of the Argument

There are two claims in the Objectivist ethics that interpreters have struggled to understand, clarify, and evaluate:

- (a) That for any organism, including humans, the life of the organism is the ultimate value that determines what other things are values or disvalues for it.
- (b) That for humans, an individual's choice to live is a precondition for life's being a value to him.

Most expositions of Rand's theory of value, including her own, argue for thesis (a) prior to and independent of (b). Thesis (a) applies across the entire biological realm, including plants and lower animals. It is grounded in the inductive generalization that living organisms, and only living organisms, are capable of goal-directed action. An organism's life is conditional; it depends on the organism's action to acquire and maintain the conditions of its own existence. In seeking any such goal, such as food, organisms face the alternative of success or failure.

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<sup>1</sup> Ole Martin Moen, "Is Life the Ultimate Value? A Reassessment of Ayn Rand's Ethics," *Reason Papers* 34, no. 2 (2012), pp. 84-116. Subsequent page references to this article are given parenthetically in the text.

Success or failure in achieving the goal makes a difference to the organism because it makes a difference to its continued survival, which is the ultimate alternative: life or death, existence or ceasing to exist. This is why Rand says that life “is a process of self-generated and self-sustaining action.” It is also why she says, “Metaphysically, life is the only phenomenon that is an end in itself.”<sup>2</sup> Understanding the precise meaning of this latter statement, whether it follows from the basic analysis of life and value, and whether it is true—these questions are one focus of debate about the Objectivist ethics.

To continue with the standard account: Every type of organism has its own specific needs that it must meet to sustain itself, and has specific capacities for self-generated action to meet those needs. For man, the essential capacity is reason, which enables us to produce material things that benefit our lives on a far greater scale than any other species is capable of. By contrast with perceptual awareness, reason is a conceptual faculty, and it is volitional. Conceptual thought enables us to identify facts far beyond the range of what is given to our senses, and we depend on such knowledge for our survival. But reason does not operate automatically; we initiate and direct the process of thought by choice.

This brings us to thesis (b), the choice to live as the precondition of life’s being a value. The second focus of debate is about what this means and in what sense, if any, it is true. Most discussions and debates frame the issue in terms of two alternatives:

- (b1) One should choose life because it is a value. The choice to live is not pre-moral.
- (b2) Life is a value because one chooses it. The choice is a precondition for moral values and obligations.

Both positions, however, accept that life is the only thing that *could* be an end in itself or of ultimate value. Within this framework, the fundamental choice is the choice to live, and the only alternative is choosing not to live. The concern that a pre-moral choice opens the door to subjectivism, which leads Douglas Rasmussen and others to defend (b1), pertains specifically to a fundamental choice to live, on the assumption that once we settle the issue between (b1) and (b2), all other choices can and should be made on the basis of reasons tracing back to the standard of supporting one’s life. In other words, all of the writers Moen considers in Section 4—Rasmussen in defense of (b1), Nathaniel Branden, Allan Gotthelf, Irfan Khawaja, and me in defense of (b2)—share the same framework. First we establish that life is the only thing that could be an ultimate value, and only then raise the question of how that value relates to choice.

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<sup>2</sup> Ayn Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: New American Library, 1964), pp. 16 and 18.

Moen rejects that framework. He denies that the ultimate value of life can be established prior to and independently of choice. As he puts it, “the choice to live cannot be seen as superfluous to the justification of the principle that life is the ultimate value” (p. 97). His argument runs as follows: Rand’s biocentric analysis of value establishes that

- (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. (p. 92)

This list does not include thesis (a) above, that life is an ultimate value. Nor does it include the claim that life is metaphysically an end in itself, nor the claim that life or death is a fundamental alternative. Moen mentions these further claims, but argues that none of them follows from (1)-(3). As he says of the items on his list,

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. (p. 92)

Moen’s case for that claim is not entirely clear to me. In the passage immediately following, he says that the observations

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. (p. 92)

The second sentence seems to acknowledge that life may indeed be the ultimate value for nonhuman organisms. The counterexample of acting in ways that harm us applies only to humans. Moen seems to acknowledge the same point elsewhere. Responding to Rasmussen’s argument that life is the ultimate value because it is metaphysically an end in itself, he says,

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.

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. (p. 95)

As these passages make clear, Moen is relying on a distinction between descriptive and prescriptive accounts of value. He is concerned with the claim that life is the ultimate value in a *prescriptive* sense. Because we have the capacity for choice—including the choice of what to accept and pursue as an ultimate value—it is possible for us to act in ways that do not support our lives. The question is whether we *should* act in accordance with a moral code based on our lives as ultimate *ethical* values. Here is Moen's analysis of Rand's answer to the question:

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 "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 action are required to implement his choice. If he does not choose to live, nature will take its course." . . . [T]he 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. (p. 93)

But this raises the question of subjectivity. Like Rasmussen, Moen is concerned that the moral code will lack prescriptive force if it depends on a pre-moral choice. Since Moen denies that the ultimate value of life can be established prior to and independently of choice, moreover, the threat of subjectivism is much wider. The choice of an ultimate value is not a constrained choice between choosing to live and choosing not to live. The choice is wide open. Of course we must choose to live if we are to pursue any value at all. But that does not necessarily mean we are choosing life as our *ultimate* value. And not choosing life as an ultimate value does not necessarily mean we are choosing death. In general,

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 . . . (p. 98)

Moen wields this point like a razor against Branden, Khawaja, and Gotthelf, and might have done so against the rest of us—and against Rand herself. And it seems to me that this consequence does follow from Moen's prior conclusion that life as an ultimate value cannot be established prior to the issue of choice. The question is whether he has established that conclusion.

I don't think he has.

For one thing, I think Moen misstates Rand's point about the significance of the choice to live. In the passage quoted above, he says that what grounds her "view that life is the ultimate value in the prescriptive sense is a choice to live—a commitment to continue living." But a choice is an act, not a premise or an argument that can ground a view. For Rand the choice to live is what makes a person's life an actual value for him. But what makes life an ultimate value (once chosen) is that it is a fundamental alternative, an end in itself. In this respect, I don't think Moen has fully addressed Rand's account of the transition from *value as such*, a concept that applies to all living organisms, to *ethical value*, applicable only to humans.

My main concern about Moen's argument, however, is the sharp distinction he draws between descriptive and prescriptive claims, and the allied distinction between biological (or, as I would prefer to say, biocentric) values and ethical or moral values. Moen seems to take these distinctions for granted. But given the weight they bear in the argument, I think he owes us a fuller analysis. In his summary of Rand's view that the concept of value depends on the concept of life (Section 2), he takes pains to explain her epistemological view that to understand the meaning of a concept we must trace it back to its perceptual basis. He goes on to show how Rand follows this method in her analysis of value. How would that method apply to Moen's conception of prescription, of moral values and obligations?

The question is important because Rand, along with most of her followers and interpreters, does not think that the distinction is as stark as Moen does.<sup>3</sup> There is a distinction, to be sure, between value as such and moral value. As Rand says, morality is "a code of values *accepted by choice*."<sup>4</sup> Choice is what underlies the prescriptive element in morality, the feature that makes praise and blame appropriate. Rand is not always careful

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<sup>3</sup> Moen himself seems to acknowledge the point in his summary of Rand's view: "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" (p. 88 n. 10).

<sup>4</sup> Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," p. 25 (emphasis added).

about observing the distinction, as when she says, “The fact that a living entity *is*, determines what it *ought* to do. So much for the issue of the relation between ‘*is*’ and ‘*ought*’.”<sup>5</sup> If “ought” has its usual prescriptive sense, then it does not apply to nonhumans. Nevertheless, the distinction is not a dichotomy. Ethical values are a species of values as such. The distinguishing features that differentiate them as a specific type of value, according to Rand, are rooted in the distinguishing features of man’s mode of knowledge—that it is conceptual and volitional. Thus ethical values must be discovered by conceptual thought and identified in the form of principles, and they must be chosen. But what is true of a genus is true of a species. Ethical values inherit the properties of value as such, including the fundamentality of the alternative of life or death and the fact that things have value only in relation to the life of the organism as an ultimate value.

The foregoing line of thought started with the concept of moral value and argued that it is grounded in the wider concept of biocentric value. We can also look at the transition from the other end, so to speak, beginning with values and valuing in the nonhuman realm. Moen refers to values at this level as “descriptive” (pp. 91 and 92). But are they not normative? Beavers survive by building dams. Doesn’t that mean dams are good for beavers, that it is good for them to build dams, that a good dam-builder is a good beaver? These are not prescriptive claims—we can’t blame a lazy or incompetent beaver as a moral failure—but the claims are normative. Given Rand’s basic analysis of value and life, with which Moen seems to agree, we have already crossed a line from the purely descriptive to the normative. From there, the further step from the merely normative to prescriptive norms does not seem a giant leap. On the contrary, it’s a reasonable step in light of the considerations in the previous paragraph.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> In contemporary philosophy, the terms “normative” and “prescriptive” tend to be treated as synonyms, equally contrasted with “descriptive.” That may reflect an implicit assumption that norms and rules apply only to humans. An exception is Philippa Foot, who, like Rand, thinks that evaluative terms have wider application to living organisms as such. In *Natural Goodness*, Foot uses the term “evaluative” consistently in talking about judgments regarding the good of living things—their flourishing, survival, and reproduction in accordance with the mode of life of the species. But she also frequently uses the term “normative,” e.g., “In the description of natural goodness in plant and animal life we have been talking about normative judgments of goodness and defect that, even here, would naturally be called ‘evaluative’” (Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003], p. 36).

### 3. Happiness

Like the two issues I mentioned at the beginning of the previous section, the relation between life and happiness is another perennial issue in the Objectivist ethics. In what way (if any) is happiness a constituent part of life as an ultimate value?

In making his case that happiness rather than life is the ultimate value, Moen begins with a question:

[I]t 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? (p. 103)<sup>7</sup>

The first step in Moen's argument, accordingly, is that happiness adds to the value of a life—makes it more worth living—in a way that makes it valuable for its own sake. The second step comes in his response to the objection that making happiness the ultimate value raises the same question about justification that arises with choosing life. If happiness is valuable as an end in itself, not a means to some further value, then where does the choice to pursue happiness get its prescriptive force? Moen argues that “it is argumentatively less costly to justify the ultimate value of happiness than the ultimate value of life” (p. 109). In the case of life,

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. (p. 109)

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<sup>7</sup> I make the same point in “Choosing Life” (talk given at The Objectivist Center's 1999 Summer Seminar, accessed online at: <http://www.atlassociety.org/choosing-life>, Section III.a.):

If I ask you what gives your life meaning, what makes it worth living, you understand what I am asking . . . Yet on the Objectivist theory, this question shouldn't make any sense. Life is the highest value, the ultimate value, the end in itself, with everything else serving as a means to it. So how can some other value make life worth living? Doesn't that imply that that other value is highest, that it's the real end in itself for which life is a means?

But I take this question in a different direction from Moen.

Though his argument seems at odds with Rand's, the view that Moen ultimately defends is very close to hers. In the final section of his paper, he notes that at times Rand herself treats happiness as an ultimate value, as do many other Objectivist writers. He goes on to suggest a reconciliation based on Rand's distinction between a purpose and a standard: "Happiness can properly be the *purpose* of ethics, but not the *standard*."<sup>8</sup> I think Moen's analysis of this distinction is accurate and insightful. At the end of the day, at least on this issue, his view seems essentially the same as hers. But there are differences that I want to flag.

The first has to do with the complexity of a human life as a phenomenon, and thus as an ultimate goal. When Rand says that happiness is a legitimate moral purpose but that life must be the moral standard, she is distinguishing happiness as an emotional state from life as an existential state and process. But in the same section of "The Objectivist Ethics," she asserts a very tight connection between them:

The maintenance of life and the pursuit of happiness are not two separate issues. To hold one's own life as one's ultimate value, and one's own happiness as one's highest purpose are two aspects of the same achievement.<sup>9</sup>

Elsewhere, she speaks more expansively about ultimate purposes. Consider, for example, this list of passages from *Atlas Shrugged*, each of which seems to assert some ultimacy for the term in bold<sup>10</sup>:

(1) Dagny and Rearden (I, 4)

If **joy** is the aim and the core of existence, [Dagny] thought, and if that which has the power to give joy is always guarded as one's deepest secret, then they had seen each other naked in that moment. (p. 87)

(2) The young Francisco (I, 5)

Dagny: "Francisco, what's the most depraved type of human being?"

Francisco: "The man without a **purpose**." . . .

"Dagny, there's nothing of any importance in life—except how well you do **your work**. Nothing. Only

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<sup>8</sup> Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> All page references are to the centennial edition: Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Plume, 2005).

that. Whatever else you are, will come from that. It's the only measure of human value . . . ." (pp. 99-100)

(3) Dagny-Rearden love scene (I, 8)

Through all the steps of the years behind them, the steps down a course chosen in the courage of a single loyalty: their love of **existence** . . . they had moved by the power of the thought that one remakes the earth for **one's enjoyment**, that man's spirit gives meaning to insentient matter by molding it to serve **one's chosen purpose**. (p. 252)

(4) Dagny waiting for Rearden to arrive (II, 1)

The hours ahead, like all her nights with him, would be added, she thought, to that savings account of one's life where moments of time are stored away in the **pride** of having been **lived**. The only pride in her workday was not that it had been lived, but that it had been **survived**. It was wrong, she thought, it was viciously wrong that one should ever be forced to say that about any hour of one's life. (p. 367)

(5) Rearden watching Dagny at the Taggart wedding party (II, 2)

Then, as if a single, sudden blow to his brain blasted a moment's shift of perspective, he felt an immense astonishment at what he was doing here and why. He lost, for that moment, all the days and dogmas of his past; his concepts, his problems, his pain were wiped out; he knew only—as from a great, clear distance—that man exists for **the achievement of his desires**, and he wondered why he stood here, he wondered who had the right to demand that he waste a single irreplaceable hour of his life, when his only desire was to seize the slender figure in gray and hold her through the length of whatever time there was left for him to exist. (p. 398)

(6) Francisco speaking to Rearden (II, 3)

"Did you ask me to name man's motive power? Man's motive power is his **moral code**. Ask yourself where their code is leading you and what it offers you as your final goal." (p. 455)

(7) Dagny's reaction to Directive 10-289 (II, 6)

She did not know that the thing which seemed so violent, yet felt like such a still, unfamiliar calm within

her, was the power of full certainty—and that the anger shaking her body, the anger which made her ready, with the same passionate indifference, either to kill or to die, was her love of **rectitude**, the only love to which all the years of her life had been given. (p. 552)

- (8) Rearden's soliloquy on signing the Gift Certificate (II, 6)  
I damned the fact that **joy** is the core of existence, the motive power of every living being, that it is the need of one's body as it is the goal of one's spirit, . . . (p. 564)
- (9) Francisco at Dagny's cabin, trying to recruit her (II, 8)  
"They use your love of **virtue** as a hostage. They know that you'll bear anything in order to work and produce, because you know that **achievement** is man's highest moral purpose, that he can't exist without it, and your love of virtue is your love of **life**." (p. 619)
- (10) Dagny in the Gulch, at Galt's powerhouse (III, 1)  
But she knew that there was no meaning in motors or factories or trains, that their only meaning was in man's **enjoyment of his life**, which they served—and that her swelling admiration at the sight of an achievement was for the man from whom it came, for the power and the radiant vision within him which had seen the earth as a place of enjoyment and had known that the work of **achieving one's happiness** was the purpose, the sanction and the meaning of life. (p. 731)
- (11) Francisco to Dagny, on discovering she is alive in the valley (III, 2)  
"Dagny, every form of happiness is one, every desire is driven by the same motor—by our love for a single value, for **the highest potentiality of our own existence**—and every achievement is an expression of it." (p. 768)
- (12) Thompson tries to persuade Galt to cooperate (III, 8)  
Thompson: "Don't you want to **live**?"  
Galt: "Passionately." He saw the snap of a spark in Mr. Thompson's eyes and smiled. "I'll tell you more: I know that I want to live much more intensely than you do. I know that that's what you're counting on. I know that you, in fact, do not want to live at all. I want it.

And because I want it so much, I will accept no substitute.” (p. 1104)

What I find interesting about such passages is the range of things that Rand asserts are fundamental purposes, values, commitments, and/or motivations. The list includes joy, purpose, work, existence, pride, achievement of one’s desires, one’s moral code, rectitude, virtue, happiness, realization of potential—and, of course, life. We could reduce the list to a few categories—perhaps life/existence, happiness, purpose/achievement, and virtue/pride. In any case, Rand’s ease in moving from one to another suggests that she sees them as intrinsically connected elements in the ultimate value. Those elements can be distinguished conceptually; we can analyze their multiple relationships and dependencies; but they cannot validly be treated as isolated atoms. They are structurally connected elements in the complex whole that is a life well-lived, the life we pursue as our ultimate value. That seems to me the best interpretation of Rand’s thought, and in any case I believe it is true.

At several points, Moen seems to take a more atomistic view of these elements. One example is a criticism of a point I make in “Choosing Life,” when I introduce a discussion of core purposes in one’s life with an anecdote:

In a local Department of Motor Vehicles I once saw a poster intended to discourage drunk driving. It was called “50 Reasons for Living,” and the reasons were: balloons, ice cream, hugs, Thanksgiving, flowers . . . . Despite its sentimentality and superficiality, the list reflects an obvious truth: [The meaning of life] is connected with things we find intrinsically satisfying and not merely means to an end.<sup>11</sup>

In response, Moen says, “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” (p. 111). I think the response misinterprets my point. I was not concerned with either of the abstract meta-ethical theses I discussed in Section 2 above: that life is the ultimate value and that a person’s life is a value to him because he chooses it. I was concerned with the way in which the choice to live is made and experienced concretely. Choosing to live means choosing the life one has, choosing to continue existing as an entity with a specific identity. It means choosing to continue a life with a unique, particular content that includes the things one has done; one’s traits, beliefs, goals, and circumstances; and—to the point in the passage at hand—the core purposes that one experiences as intrinsically valuable, constitutive rather than instrumental means to the ultimate value of one’s life. In this sense, the value *of* a life consists in the

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<sup>11</sup> Kelley, “Choosing Life.”

values *in* that life. In short, I do not see how one can separate life from its content, including its experiential content.<sup>12</sup> (Of course one can change that content, even its basic elements: one can modify or abandon a purpose, enhance a virtue, overcome a fault, etc. But one does these things with the resources one has as the person one is, in pursuit of more fundamental goals.)

My argument so far has aimed to undermine what I take to be an atomistic distinction between life *per se* as a value and its elements. At an abstract level, the passages I cite above from *Atlas Shrugged* illustrate the way in which Rand thought of existence, achievement, and happiness as intrinsically connected elements in the ultimate value of life. In the concrete, the life of an individual is the ongoing existence of a person with a specific identity, whose life has a specific content. To put the point in epistemological terms, the conception of life as an ultimate value depends on the concept of life, and life is a complex phenomenon. We can isolate its various dimensions conceptually. In particular, we can abstract the dimension of survival—the existence of an entity that initiates action to sustain itself—from the other attributes of human beings. Like all concepts, however, the concept of life subsumes *all* the attributes of its referents.<sup>13</sup>

On the Objectivist theory of concepts, however, we must identify which characteristics are essential. So we can still ask, in regard to the choice to live, which element or dimension is essential to the object of our choice. In this sense, Moen's claim that happiness is the essential element is an answer to a valid question. But I would argue on epistemological grounds that the claim cannot be sustained.

Happiness includes a wide range of emotional states with positive affective and motivational valence: the giddy joy of falling in love, the pride of meeting a deadline, the serenity of coming to terms with a threatening fact, the experience of flow when one is engrossed in an activity that is going well, and on and on. As modes of consciousness, these experiences are of or about something; they have intentional content. The Objectivist axiom of consciousness asserts that to be conscious is to be conscious of something, and the axiom is true of affective states no less than cognitive ones. The corollary principle is the primacy of existence: In the subject-object relation, the object is primary; it is what it is, independently of the consciousness of it, whereas consciousness is dependent.

For a cognitive state like perception, what this means is that the apple I see is there, it exists, and it is the content of my perceptual awareness. My

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<sup>12</sup> Other Objectivist scholars have made similar points, pointing to positive elements in the content of one's life that can motivate the choice to live and function as reasons for it (not reasons that make the choice morally obligatory but that draw one's attention to what is at stake). See Moen's references, p. 111.

<sup>13</sup> Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* (New York: New American Library, 1979): "the concept subsumes *all* the characteristics of its referents, including the yet-to-be-discovered" (p. 66).

experience is not of a phenomenal world created by my conscious capacities, as some idealists have held. Nor am I directly aware only of an inner content—an appearance—that is independent of the external object, as many representationalists have held. To be sure, the apple does appear a certain way that is partly determined by the nature of my visual system as well as the conditions of perception. But it is still the apple that appears, the apple that I perceive. It is fallacious to infer that, because I perceive the apple in virtue of its appearance, I am therefore really aware of the appearance.<sup>14</sup>

Of course one can attend to the appearance, in the way that a painter would, and in that sense make it an object of attention. Even so, what one attends to is the appearance *of* the apple, not a detached or independent state of consciousness. Again, one can desire a perceptual experience because of its phenomenological character, as when I go outside to enjoy the sunset. But the experience I seek is the experience *of* the sun, sky, and horizon. Perception is a real relation to its objects in the world. By the primacy of existence, those objects are essential terms in the relationship.<sup>15</sup>

Affective states like pleasure, pain, and emotions are modes of consciousness in which we experience objects as good or bad for us. The felt qualities of these states are analogous to the sensory qualities in perceptual experience. The red color of the apple, for example, is the form in which I am aware of the reflectance properties of the apple's surface. Its coolness to the touch is the form in which I am aware of the molecular kinetic energy of its surface in relation to that of my hands. In the same way, I would argue, when a knife slips and I cut my hand, the pain is my awareness of the cut in a form that makes me aware of the tissue damage. By analogy with the case of seeing the apple, the fact that pain is the way such damage appears to me does not imply that the real object of my experience is of an inner quality, separated from and independent of the knife and the cut. The painful dimension of the experience, moreover, cannot be detached from the other dimensions in my perception of the cut, including the awareness of the pressure and motion of the knife, just as seeing the apple's color is one dimension of the integrated perception of the apple as an entity, which includes my awareness of its shape, size, and location.

Emotions too are directed at objects. To be afraid is to fear something, to love is to love someone (or something), to feel pride is to be proud of something. But emotions are more complex because, unlike sensory pleasure and pain, they are typically based on an appraisal of the object, an appraisal that, whether conscious or not, has conceptual content: this action

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<sup>14</sup> The systematic case for these claims can be found in David Kelley, *The Evidence of the Senses* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1986).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*: "A consciousness conscious of nothing but itself is a contradiction in terms: before it could identify itself as consciousness, it had to be conscious of something" (p. 1015).

was unjust (anger), this person embodies my deepest values (love), I met this challenge (pride), etc. In the Objectivist epistemology, the relation between conceptual cognition and its objects in reality is far more complex than is the case in perception, and the point applies as well to emotions with conceptual content. An emotional response depends in particular on how one interprets and evaluates the object, and the interpretation and evaluation in turn depend on prior knowledge and value premises. In order to be angry at an insult, I must recognize it as an allegation about me and evaluate it as unjustified.<sup>16</sup>

The conceptual content implicit in an emotion can be extensive. For example, I am proud that I finished and published a book. That's a happy feeling. But the emotion is not a direct perceptual response to the physical copy in my hands. It arises from and embodies a much wider context of knowledge: what books, publishers, and readers are; what it took to write the book and get it published; the insights I expressed in the book, and the thinking behind them; etc. In short, the affective quality of an emotion is the form in which we experience the value or disvalue of the object as conceptually identified, rather than as perceived directly. As with pleasure and pain, however, it is the object—and specifically its value significance—that we experience by means of the affect.

Moen addresses the dependence of emotion on value judgments when he acknowledges Rand's objection to hedonism: that happiness cannot be the standard of value, because, as an emotion, it results from the values one has antecedently accepted. That is why, in the end, he agrees with Rand's distinction between happiness as the proper purpose while life is the standard. But his formulation still suggests a sharper distinction than I think is warranted:

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. (p. 114)

What I take exception to in this passage is the term “external.” If we take the primacy of existence seriously, and apply the principle to emotions as well as cognition, the object of an emotion is *not* external to the emotion. As a conscious state, the emotion is necessarily related to its object(s) in the world.

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<sup>16</sup> This “appraisal theory” of emotions, which is now widely accepted, has long been the standard Objectivist view of emotions. See Nathaniel Branden, *The Psychology of Self-Esteem* (New York: Bantam, 1971), chap. V. In psychology, the view was pioneered by Magda Arnold in *Emotion and Personality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960). Arnold's book may have been an influence on the Objectivist view; it was positively reviewed by Robert Efron in *The Objectivist* 5 (January 1966), pp. 12-15.

I have made this point in regard to specific emotions—specific, at-a-moment experiences of objects and specific forms of happiness. But if we think of happiness as an ongoing, pervasive reaction to a life that is going well, which I take Moen to be referring to here, my point applies on that larger scale: One is happy *about* one's life. One's life is the internal object of the emotion, and to seek and experience that happiness is to seek and experience the value of one's life. In that sense, life is the purpose as well as the standard of valuation.

#### 4. Conclusion

In Section 2 of my response to Moen's article, I raised questions about the logic of his argument for the thesis that happiness, rather than life, is the ultimate value. The argument centers on the choice to live in Rand's ethics and Moen's concern that if the choice is pre-moral then life will not have prescriptive force as an ethical value. Unlike other interpreters of Rand who share this concern, however, Moen does not think that life as an ultimate value can be established prior to the question of choice—leaving the field wide open to other possible values as ultimate. In addition to noting gaps in the case he makes for that claim, I questioned his dichotomy between “descriptive” and “prescriptive” values.

In Section 3, I discussed Moen's view of happiness as an ultimate value. His final view is similar to Rand's in holding that even if happiness is properly considered the ultimate purpose in ethics, achieving happiness requires that one adopt life as the fundamental standard of value. But I questioned his formulation of that view on two counts: (1) I think Moen draws too sharp a distinction between life as a value and the values that make up the content of one's life, especially those that are constituent means. (2) The Objectivist principle of the primacy of existence implies that an emotion like happiness is internally related to its object; making an emotion the goal of one's actions is *ipso facto* to make its object a goal.

That said, I salute Moen for taking Rand's project seriously and raising such important questions to think about.

