

More Different Than You Think: Rejoinder to Bissell

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1. Introduction

Roger Bissell contends that the differences between Individualistic Perfectionism (IP) and Objectivist Ethics (OE) are considerably less extensive than we have previously argued.¹ We find this claim interesting, so we will consider Bissell's reasons in a point-by-point manner. We will conclude by noting what we regard as the most fundamental difference between IP and OE.

2. Metaethics

(1) Bissell states: "Rand...is strongly oriented toward the *actual*, not the *potential*. ...[She] has no truck with people who claim to 'value' something but who take no actions toward that thing" (p. 45). He then seems to claim that the activity of X-ing has potential value for a living being *only* because that being *actually* engages in X-ing. Accordingly, if a living being never so engages in X-ing, X-ing cannot be said to have potential value for it. There is then only what is actual or actualizing.

We find this claim curious. Can one not say there are actions that are good for a living thing to do, even if that living thing does not

¹ Roger E. Bissell, "Individualistic Perfectionism versus Objectivism: A Distinction Without Much Difference?" *Reason Papers* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2024): pp. 44–52. All subsequent citations to this will be parenthetically in the text.

actually do them? Imagine someone who firmly detests and is committed to not exercising regularly. Is it wrong to say that exercising regularly is nonetheless something one ought to do? If one cannot correctly speak of what one could and should value, then ethics seems impossible. Ethics is about the normative, which means it is inherently about what one *should* do. Hence, it would seem that one speaks correctly when noting that there could be something worthwhile to pursue even though one does not and possibly might not ever pursue it. What are we to call that which we could and possibly should pursue? A natural candidate is “potential values.” Bissell does say that the connection of potential values to actual values “is only derivative and secondary” (p. 45), but this does not help his claim, because this seems to foreclose the possibility of potential values ever providing guidance for what one should actually value.

(2) According to Bissell’s critique of our view, the difference between IP and OE “boils down to a *conflation of potential and actual*, a failure . . . to fully incorporate the distinction between the actual and the potential (or ‘grades of actuality’) into their discussion of Rand’s view of the nature of the good” (p. 48). There seems to be some confusion regarding what is meant by “grades of actuality”; hence, our account of this notion bears noting:

IP holds with Aristotle that there is a distinction between grades of actuality when it comes to living things. The first grade of actuality is the possession of a set of capacities that are also potentialities for a living thing’s second grade of actuality—that is, their actual use or deployment by a living thing. Included among the set of potentialities of a human being that comprise its first grade of actuality is the potential to exercise one’s conceptual capacity. This first grade of actuality is a cognitive-independent reality. However, when one’s conceptual capacity is exercised and used in a manner that actualizes the other potentialities that require it, then a second grade of actuality is attained. For example, one has the capacity to know one’s good and attain it (first grade of actuality), but one needs to

engage in knowing and attaining it in order to be fully actualized (second grade of actuality).²

We know of nowhere in Rand’s writings where she invokes the Aristotelian concept of grades of actuality when it comes to living things. More importantly, though, the point of this doctrine is that the distinction between what is actual and what is potential does not always require a dichotomy. There can be *cognitive-independent actualities* that also are potentialities. Thus, to attain a second grade of actuality does *not* mean or imply that what is being actualized is only a potentiality. An actuality can be further actualized. The second grade of actuality is in a way “built into” the first.³ Aristotle is subtle.⁴

The relevance of this doctrine has a direct bearing on Bissell’s interpretation of Rand’s claim that human good is an aspect of reality in relation to a human being that is not invented but discovered. He contends, in effect, that two relationships are involved: (1) a relationship between the aspect of reality and a human being in which that aspect is a potential good for a human being and (2) a relationship between a human being and an aspect of reality in which that aspect is an actual good for a human being (p. 46). He further contends that “[t]his latter relationship requires an actual encounter between the living being and the relevant aspect of reality as well as an evaluation by the living being by means of physical and/or conscious processes that assess the ability of the aspect of reality to satisfy some need of his” (p. 46). Fair enough (at least for the moment), but this does not mean or imply that

² Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl, “Three Forms of Neo-Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism: A Comparison,” *Reason Papers* 43, no. 2 (Fall 2023): pp. 14-43, quotation at p. 22.

³ Physical growth might be a paradigm example of moving from the first to the second grade of actuality. What one is like at age eight contains within it what one will be like at age eighteen (ignoring any outside factors such as disease). With deliberation and judgment, the matter is more complex, but even here the core element is a movement from one grade of actuality to the next. What is “built in” is the capacity to deliberate and judge based on recognition of the nature of things.

⁴ See Aristotle, *On the Soul* II.1–3. For a more detailed account of this doctrine, see Fred. D. Miller, Jr.’s introduction to Aristotle, *On the Soul and Other Psychological Works*, trans. Fred D. Miller, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. xxvi–xxxii.

relationship (1) is only an unrealized potentiality or that what that potentiality for a human being involves, and thus requires for actualization, is not a cognitive-independent reality. Most assuredly, a cognitive act is required to discover what this potentiality involves and what its achievement requires, but it is not a requirement for its existence as a first grade of actuality or what it involves as a second grade of actuality. This was the reason for our emphasizing that metaphysical realism⁵ is the context in which IP is to be understood and our noting that human good is not a concept. As such, human good “is neither abstract nor universal, but individualized. It comprises a complex reality that expresses a relationship of potentiality for actuality, which is understood not only in terms of efficient causality but final and formal causality as well.”⁶

Moreover, although attaining one’s second grade of actuality requires both cognition and practical actions to exist, this does not make human good an evaluation.⁷ To hold a so-called objective view of human good not only means that the two relationships Bissell notes are objects of cognition, but also that the evaluation that is employed is in accord with the facts that constitute the standard for evaluation. What makes an individual human being good does not consist in our evaluation of him as good but in how well he has actualized himself. Even as a second grade of actuality, what it is for an individual human being to be good is not an evaluation or concept in any sense. That is simply a form of

⁵ “There are beings that exist and are what they are independent and apart from our cognition of them, but these beings can nonetheless come to be known.” Rasmussen and Den Uyl, “Three Forms of Neo-Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism,” p. 21.

⁶ Ibid., p. 22. We are speaking here of an active as opposed to a passive potentiality, but another way to express this point is that first and second grades of actuality are not equivalent to potentiality and actuality as Bissell appears to understand them. One’s pen, for example, has the potential to fall off my desk. That is not a first grade of actuality. First and second grades of actuality have to do with inherent properties. OE seems to exhibit no conceptual mechanism for distinguishing pushing the pencil off the desk and one’s becoming a philosopher. The seed is in the first grade of actuality toward becoming a flower. You have dispositional dimensions to becoming a philosopher. This is not at all like the potentiality you have to go to Harvard.

⁷ See Ayn Rand, “What Is Capitalism?” in Ayn Rand, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (New York: New American Library, 1966), p. 14.

rationalism. To make human good an evaluation suggests a conflation of concepts with realities.

(3) Bissell also states: “the ultimate difference they [Rasmussen and Den Uyl] infer between themselves and Rand—‘Obligation ultimately rests in OE [Objectivist Ethics] on one’s choice, while in IP [Individualistic Perfectionism] . . . it rests on what is one’s good’ . . . — does not follow. The full, *actual* good in fact *does* ultimately rest on one’s choice” (p. 48). Here is what we say:

Human good understood in terms of what the first grade of human actuality entails needs to be discovered in order for a human being to attain his form of life—his manner of living—and what that involves—the second grade of human actuality. This means that engaging in the act of discovering human good is good for a human being. It is choice-worthy and ought to be done. Not knowing one’s human good does not relieve one of the obligation to discover and attain it, since human beings can in principle make such a discovery. This discovery is of course self-directed, but self-direction can still be for human good without its being compelled to that end. Teleology is not compulsion.⁸

Even though human cognition and choice are necessary for the actualization of human good, this does not mean that what is being actualized is only a disconnected potentiality. As already noted, it is “built into” our nature. It certainly does not mean that human cognition and choice determine what human good is. Additionally, since we understand human good as our *telos*,⁹ then we also know that we should act to discover and achieve it. We ought to choose it because it is our

⁸ Rasmussen and Den Uyl, “Three Forms of Neo-Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism,” p. 22.

⁹ You cannot have teleology without first and second grades of actuality, and this is why OE has no way to speak of human good as an actuality apart from choice. It is, however, incorrect to say it is only a potential good for me until I choose it, and then it becomes an actual good. If it is good, it was so for you before you chose it. Indeed, a third party can identify it as such—for example, “Given your desire to be familiar with the Aristotelian tradition, you must read Aquinas.” The fact that you have not read him yet does not mean he is not a good for you. It only means you have not yet benefited from that good.

good and our end. Human good, not choice, is the basis for moral obligation; as we have noted in many places,¹⁰ this illustrates a marked difference between IP and OE.

3. Normative Ethics

(4) With regard to normative ethics, Bissell claims that “Rasmussen and Den Uyl maintain that Rand somehow ‘opens the door to the possibility of conflict’” (p. 49). This is not true; rather we hold that it is *our* account of human good that opens the door to the possibility of conflict:

Since the character of human flourishing as a cognitive independent reality is neither abstract nor universal but always expressed in individualized form, one person’s concrete form of flourishing is not the same as someone else’s. Abstractly considered, the goods and virtues found in the lives and characters of human beings may be regarded as the same, but in reality they are and must be individuated, which opens the door to the possibility of conflict.¹¹

It is Rand who shuts the door on the possibility of conflict between concrete forms of human flourishing or self-perfection.¹²

(5) Bissell goes on to claim that “conflict” is normally understood to involve the use of physical force or fraud between parties, whereas competition “simply involves two (or more) parties pursuing the same goal that only one of them can attain” (p. 49), and so “conflict” and “competition” should not be confused. Moreover, he insists that competition between football teams would not be called a conflict of values, “since the attainable value for each player on each team is in competitive play, which itself means having a team to play with and a

¹⁰ See Rasmussen and Den Uyl, “Three Forms of Neo-Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism,” p. 23 n. 15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹² We use the terms “human flourishing” and “self-perfection” interchangeably. See Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen, *The Perfectionist Turn: From Metanorms to Metaethics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 171–200.

team to play against. So long as everyone abides by the agreed-upon rules, there will be no conflict between individuals” (p. 49).

Although “conflict” can refer to the use of physical force or fraud between parties, it certainly does not necessarily mean this. The most common way of understanding conflict between parties is to note that their respective goals are incompatible. The verb “conflict” means to be incompatible or at variance, to clash. Furthermore, while it is certainly true that members of a football team choose to engage in competitive play—according to the rules and hopefully against the best opponents—this alone does not suffice to explain all that they do. They also play to win, which generally means that one team wins and another loses. Their goals, their values, conflict.

However, Bissell is claiming that if you and I are in competition for some end and agree about the rules of the game, we also agree that the one with most merit should win. You win. Assuming superior merit on your part, I now have to say that my interest is in you winning because my interest is in having the best man win, so there is no conflict even though I lost. I am okay with losing, though, because my interest was in the best man winning. Therefore, there is no conflict between *rational* men because our end (a rational one) is the same, namely, having the best man win.

Nonetheless, this does not follow. First, there is conflict in acting for the end, else we could not find out who was better. Second, this line of reasoning ignores the individual. We can attach ourselves to abstract universalized ends, but it does not follow from that that we have the same concrete ends. To us, the rational person would say, “Yep, good job, Roger, but I plan to do better next time we meet.” That shows individuality and graciousness to the winner. This brings us to our next point.

(6) Bissell holds that “[i]n general, your ‘righteous interest’ is not for you to have something you want rather than for someone else to have it, which *would* be a conflict of interest with anyone else desiring the same thing, but to be able to *pursue* what you want from what is available and to *attain* whatever you can get without violating anyone else’s free choice” (p. 50). He is correct to suggest that one’s “righteous interest” is more than simply having what one wants, whether it conflicts with what another person wants or not. IP indeed holds that human good is the satisfaction of *right* desire. Additionally, doing so in a context that

does not violate the basic, negative, natural rights of individuals is also good and appropriate. Having the liberty to pursue a flourishing life is vital. Nonetheless, it remains the case that X pursuing his righteous interest and attaining whatever he can get without violating the rights of Y does not preclude the possibility that there might be a situation where X's attainment of X's interest prevents Y's attainment of Y's interest—or vice versa. Joint acceptance of a framework for action does not avoid the possibility of conflict between the actions themselves.

Perhaps an example would be helpful here, so consider some characters from Rand's 1957 novel *Atlas Shrugged*. There are two men, John Galt and Francisco d' Anconia, who love the same woman, Dagny Taggart. Each man wants her to choose her ultimate love, each only wants her love if she chooses the man she believes to be her ultimate love, and each would be reconciled with her choice. They each want the best for her. Let us say that all this is entirely true. However, this does not show that it would not be better for Galt if Dagny truly regarded him as her ultimate love instead of d' Anconia or that it would not be better for d' Anconia if Dagny truly regarded him as her ultimate love instead of Galt. This is true *ex ante*, regardless of what is said or done *ex post*.

Accordingly, IP, in contrast to OE, holds that there can be conflict within a context of righteous interest. This is for two reasons. First, what is X's righteous interest is not only numerically different but also qualitatively different from Y's—and vice versa. Second, to describe one's interests as rational neither means nor implies that they exist (or should exist) in the same way and to the same degree in person X and person Y. This is not to say that wherever there are different righteous interests there must be a conflict, but it is to say that conflicts are possible. This is one of the reasons individual rights are crucial in how IP approaches political philosophy.

(7) Bissell also argues:

Rasmussen and Den Uyl attach great significance to Rand's statement that "the actor must *always* be the beneficiary of his action and that man must act for his own *rational* self-interest." True enough, . . . What is not correct is Rasmussen and Den Uyl's claim that "for Rand to require that *only* oneself ought to be beneficiary is to adopt the same logic as that of altruism" . . .

. Rand did not say or “require” this nor that man must act only for *his own* rational self-interest. (p. 51)

It is true that *always* acting for one’s benefit does not mean *only* acting for one’s benefit. Bissell is correct to say the OE does not prohibit acting for the benefit of others. However, the crucial issue here has to do with what Rand means when she says that “the actor must *always* be the beneficiary of his action and that man must act for his own *rational* self-interest” and how that squares with her claim that the choice of a beneficiary for moral action is not a moral primary or a criterion for determining moral value, but has to be validated by “the fundamental premises of a moral system.”¹³ Bissell makes his view of this matter clear when he states that “one’s own self-interest, *one’s own values as a whole, one’s morally perfected self*, must always be primary in calculating whether to engage in an action that also benefits others” (p. 51). Yet here is the rub. Does the account of human good in terms of one’s own self-interest and the account of human good as a perfected, self-actualized human being amount to the same thing? We think not. This can be made clear by a quick review of what IP holds regarding self-perfection.

Ontologically, self-perfection is an activity, an actuality, and our ultimate end. It comprises many activities or practices (termed “final ends”), among which are the pursuit of knowledge, friendship, health, pleasure, and wealth and the exercise of integrity, temperance, courage, and justice. Self-perfection is never sought for the sake of anything else; it includes all final ends and these final ends are both constitutive and immanent activities in that their actualization make up and are manifested within the self-perfecting life. They are not merely means to self-perfection; hence, their worthwhile character is not determined by whether they produce some external result that proves to be beneficial. Rather, one engages in these activities for their own sake because they express one’s self-perfection.¹⁴

¹³ Ayn Rand, “Introduction,” in Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: Signet, 1964), p. x.

¹⁴ IP is not fundamentally a consequentialistic theory when it comes to determining what ought to be done. See Den Uyl and Rasmussen, *The Perfectionist Turn*, pp. 39–41.

This understanding of self-perfection is especially important when it comes to personal relationships based on mutual appreciation of good qualities of character—what Aristotle calls “friendships of virtue.”¹⁵ In the case of this sort of friendship, one acts for the good of one’s friend *for the friend’s sake*. One does not calculate whether it is beneficial to act for the sake of such a friend, because acting for the sake of one’s friend is definitive of this very relationship. In fact, to calculate whether to do so would be indicative of it not being a friendship of virtue and it would amount to treating what is a final, constitutive end—in this case, your friend—as simply a means.¹⁶ Accordingly, for IP, it is not only possible to act for the good of one’s friend for the friend’s sake and at the same time be engaging in self-perfection, but it is also possible for such a self-perfecting act to not provide any beneficial consequences for the actor. If one were to retort, “Are not self-perfecting actions of benefit to the actor?” one would have the order reversed. Benefits depend upon and would be understood in terms of self-perfection and not self-perfection being enhanced by benefit.¹⁷ Consciousness can be deployed to secure benefits or benefits can flow from the *proper* use of consciousness. These are different, with self-perfection being more a function of the latter. As we see it, IP is not a form of ethical egoism, while making sure to pick actions leading to the right benefits would seem to make it one—at least as normally understood.

OE is supposed to be a new concept of egoism. It would allow acting for the benefit of another. However, it would do so only if the consequences prove beneficial. To the extent OE would treat acting for the benefit of another as a constituent activity of one’s self-perfection, it would be only because it was productive of beneficial results, not because it was an expression (in part) of the very character of human self-perfection. A friendship, on this understanding, can only be a means

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII–IX.

¹⁶ Self-perfection can also involve other types of friendships that are understood as simply a means—that is, relationships with others because they are beneficial in terms of knowledge, trade, pleasure, and civil order. Aristotle calls these “friendships of advantage” and “friendships of pleasure.”

¹⁷ At the metaethical level of analysis, being beneficial is understood in terms of the actualization of an entity’s life-form, which is an immanent process. See Den Uyl and Rasmussen, *The Perfectionist Turn*, pp. 220–24.

to secure what is beneficial for oneself; it is not valuable for its own sake.¹⁸

Thus, even though always acting for one's benefit does not prohibit acting for the benefit of another, OE does require always regarding another as secondary to what benefits oneself. This makes the choice of a beneficiary a moral primary, despite what Rand claims.¹⁹

4. Conclusion

We noted in “Three Forms of Neo-Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism” that Rand holds that final causation “applies only to a conscious being.”²⁰ We further noted that she holds that

when applied to physical phenomena, such as the automatic functions of an organism, the term ‘goal-directed’ is not to be taken to mean ‘purposive’ (a concept applicable only to the actions of a consciousness) and is not to imply the existence of any teleological principle operating in insentient nature. *I use the term ‘goal-directed’ in this context, to designate the fact that the automatic functions of living organisms are actions whose nature is such that they result in the preservation of an organism’s life.*²¹

¹⁸ Rasmussen and Den Uyl, “Three Forms of Neo-Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism,” pp. 31–33.

¹⁹ We think that one of the reasons OE has been subject to harsh criticism is that it requires *always* regarding another as secondary to what benefits oneself. There is a debate within Objectivism about this issue. For those interested, see Neera K. Badhwar, *Is Virtue Only a Means to Happiness?* (Washington, DC: The Atlas Society, 2015), accessed online at: https://praxeology.net/Virtue_and_Happiness.pdf. See also Neera K. Badhwar and Roderick T. Long, “Ayn Rand,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2023), ed. Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman, accessed online at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/ayn-rand/>.

²⁰ Ayn Rand, “Causality Versus Duty,” *The Objectivist* 9, no. 7 (July 1970): 4.

²¹ Ayn Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 17n. (emphasis added).

Consequently, given this understanding of natural teleology, it seems that OE does *not* appeal to final causality in explaining what the relationship of potentiality for actuality involves when it comes to living things. Yet, if this is so, how does one determine what is the result of the functions of a living organism? Without an understanding of what a function is for, how does one select what is the relevant result? What does “result” involve? Why would not death be the result? Death happens to every living thing and is the final result.

If one does not understand a living thing’s basic potentialities as being *for* their mature state but only as what results, then there is no basis for saying what is the end of a living thing’s functions. Furthermore, it is not even clear whether it is correct to use the term “function” in this regard or to say that a living thing needs to take certain actions in order to live thereby makes fulfilling these needs its end. This possibly explains why Rand speaks of human good as an evaluation: because we must choose the result that is the standard. However, while life is something most would choose, this does not work as an argument. Indeed, it seems to beg the question. Alternatively, IP holds that all living things need to be understood teleologically and as different in kind from other physical phenomena. The biocentric nature of natural teleology needs to be recognized and defended.²² As a matter of fact, we suggested long ago that such a view of natural teleology is the best way to interpret Rand.²³ However, that is a different matter from what she actually says; besides, we have never been in the business of trying to develop her ethical system, but rather, to pursue the truth about ethics.

²² See Den Uyl and Rasmussen, *The Perfectionist Turn*, pp. 45–47, 193–98; and 219–24.

²³ See our “Life, Teleology, and Eudaimonia in the Ethics of Ayn Rand,” in *The Philosophic Thought of Ayn Rand*, ed. Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984), pp. 63–80.