

Discussion Notes

Individualistic Perfectionism versus Objectivism: A Distinction Without Much Difference?

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1. Introduction

I have argued previously¹ that Ayn Rand’s ethical theory is much closer in essence to the individualistic, self-perfectionist perspective of neo-Aristotelian Thomists Douglas Rasmussen and Douglas Den Uyl than to the “selfish,” egoistic ethics many assume to be her basic position. In this discussion note, I will continue to develop my case by addressing some of the points they have made in a recent essay.²

2. Metaethics

In discussing “value” and “the good,” Rasmussen and Den Uyl quote Rand’s definition of the former: “that which one acts to gain and/or keep.” They paraphrase her definition of the latter, which in the original reads: “that which furthers [a living organism’s] life is the *good*, that which threatens it is the *evil*.”³

¹ Roger E. Bissell, “*Eudaimon* in the Rough: Perfecting Rand’s Egoism,” *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 20, no. 2 (December 2020): pp. 452–78.

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. All subsequent citations to this will be parenthetically in the text.

³ Ayn Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 17.

The first and most important thing to note about these definitions is what Rand did *not* say. She did not say that value is “that which one *may* act to gain and/or keep” or “*should* act” or “*hopes someday* to act.” She also did not say the good is “that which *can* further” or that the evil is “that which *can* threaten.” This indicates that Rand, in her conceptualization of value, is strongly oriented toward the *actual*, not the *potential*.⁴

Not surprisingly, Rand has no truck with people who claim to “value” something but who take no actions toward that thing. Her attitude toward value and action is vividly documented in Barbara Branden’s 1962 biographical essay, “Who Is Ayn Rand?” where Branden cites Rand’s novelette and play *Ideal*, in which, she says, Rand expresses “profound scorn for those who are only ‘idealists,’ who renounce the responsibility of translating their ideals into action and reality.”⁵ Even earlier, in a 1960 lecture, after quoting Rand’s definition of “value,” Branden makes its implications even more explicit. Speaking of “the people who, in literal fact, have *no* values,” she states: “Don’t believe the man who claims to value something, but who refuses to take the actions necessary to gain or keep it.”⁶

⁴ Anyone familiar with Rand’s views on abortion is vividly, if not painfully, aware of this tenet of hers. In her 1968 Ford Hall Forum address, Rand stated: “An embryo *has no rights*. Rights do not pertain to a *potential*, only to an *actual* being.” See Ayn Rand, “Of Living Death,” in Ayn Rand, *The Voice of Reason: Essays in Objectivist Thought*, ed. Leonard Peikoff (New York: New American Library, 1988), p. 58.

⁵ See Nathaniel Branden and Barbara Branden, *Who Is Ayn Rand? An Analysis of Ayn Rand’s Works* (New York: Random House), 1962, p. 149.

⁶ See Barbara Branden, *Think as If Your Life Depends on It: Principles of Efficient Thinking and Other Lectures*, published by the Barbara Branden Legacy Trust, produced and distributed via the Amazon CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017, p. 145.

Such potentials or aspirations or unacted-upon imperatives are thus *not* values in Rand's primary sense of the term. What connection they do have to actual value is only derivative and secondary. Furthermore, the wishes, hopes, etc., that are inside one's head have an incomplete, unactualized, *potential* kind of "value" *only* because living organisms *actually* act on some of them by pursuing things in the world.

After laying out Rand's key definitions of "value" and "good," Rasmussen and Den Uyl then offer their own broad description of the latter: "What is good or bad refers to the relationship between some aspect of reality and the life of a living entity" (p. 15). Admittedly, in identifying the good as *relational*—that without some relationship of a living entity to an aspect of reality, that aspect of reality is not actually the good of that entity—it is correct, as far as it goes. Unfortunately, it only goes halfway—namely, to the *potential* good (or bad).

In truth, however, there are *two* relationships between an aspect of reality and the life of a living entity that are essential to that aspect of reality being *actually* the good for that organism. One relationship is that aspect of reality's *being able to satisfy* (that is, *potentially* satisfying) some survival need of that organism. The other relationship is that aspect of reality's *actually* satisfying that living entity's survival need. This 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 it has.

The same is true in the moral sphere, once the additional complexities of Rand's more specific definition are fully understood. As quoted by Rasmussen and Den Uyl, Rand's view of the good as a moral (not simply biological) concept can be seen to include *two* essential elements: (1) The good is "*an evaluation of the facts of reality by man's consciousness according to a rational standard of value.*" (2) The good is "*an aspect of reality in relation to man—and...it must be discovered, not invented by man.*"⁷

⁷ Ayn Rand, "What Is Capitalism?" in Ayn Rand, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (New York: Signet, 1967), p. 14.

Rand calls this the “objective” view of the good; this label is apt for two reasons. Considered as an aspect of reality, the good is *that aspect being held as the object* of evaluation by a conscious, living entity. Considered as a product of awareness, the good is the form in which a conscious living entity *holds* an aspect of reality *as the object* of its evaluation.⁸

Rasmussen and Den Uyl make much of the fact that while the *evaluation* “does not exist apart from a cognitive act” (p. 16), the *aspect of reality* being evaluated *does* exist even when one is not actively engaged in evaluating it. However, the telling point, which they quickly underscore, is that “What is good for a human being can *only* be *achieved* if it is discovered” (p. 16, emphasis added). “Achieved,” in this context, means: *actualized*. The good for a human being can only be *actual* good (actualized good) if it is discovered—that is, *known and evaluated*. Accordingly, the potential good is that which has not yet been achieved and is thus not yet actually good.

Also (though Rand does not say this), the human good can only be *actual* good *in a certain range of conditions*.⁹ Rasmussen and Den Uyl allude to this in discussing the role of practical wisdom, which helps us “in particular and contingent circumstances” (p. 33) to weight our

⁸ I call this two-pronged nature of relationships between consciousness and reality “the dual-aspect of the objective,” and I have discussed it in several previous writings, beginning with my essay “Ayn Rand and ‘The Objective’: A Closer Look at the Intrinsic-Objective-Subjective Trichotomy,” *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 9, no. 1 (Fall 2007), pp. 53–92.

⁹ In offering the following example, Leonard Peikoff sketches this much-needed amendment to Rand’s definition of the good: “the sun is a good thing (an essential of life as we know it); i.e., within the appropriate limits, its light and heat are good, good for us; other things being equal, therefore, we ought to plant our crops in certain locations, build our homes in a certain way (with windows), and so forth; beyond the appropriate limits, however, sunlight is not good (it causes burns or skin cancer); etc.” See Leonard Peikoff, “Fact and Value,” *The Intellectual Activist* 5, no. 1 (1989), accessed online at: https://peikoff.com/essays_and_articles/fact-and-value/.

various goods and virtues, to determine what is actually the good in that situation, and thus to determine what action to take. However, prior to such discovery and apart from such determination, what *can be* the human good is only *potential* good. Therefore, it is up to our practical wisdom to help us in *actualizing* that potential.

This point is implicit in, but follows directly from, Rasmussen and Den Uyl's comment that "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)" (p. 22). From the other side of the equation, *which must be included*, we can equally see that an aspect of reality has the *capacity to be one's good and to help one attain it* ("first grade of actuality"—that is, *potentiality*), but it needs to be known and attained in order *to be fully actualized as one's good* ("second grade of actuality").

Thus, the apparent difference that Rasmussen and Den Uyl see between themselves and Rand boils down to *a conflation of potential and actual*, a failure by Rasmussen and Den Uyl 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. Accordingly, the ultimate difference they 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" (p. 24)—does not follow. The full, *actual* good in fact *does* ultimately rest on one's choice, which flows from an evaluation, utilizing the logic of practical reason and the insight of practical wisdom, of the aspect of reality that otherwise is only one's *potential* good. The good prior to cognition *is* "a reality to be discovered," but at that point, it is a reality, an actuality, that is still just a *potential* good. For Rand, cognition actualizes an actual reality that is a potential good into an actual reality that is an actual good. Hence, goodness *is not* fundamentally about independently existing, uncognized realities, but about them *as actualities*. They are still independently existing realities, but now they are also *cognized*.

Just to be fully clear on this point, I am *not* arguing here that since one cannot have *the concept* of "the good" apart from one's

cognitive efforts, then *that which that concept is about* cannot exist apart from those efforts either. That would be an error, as Rasmussen and Den Uyl correctly point out: a conflation of thought and reality. What Rand is arguing here is that the *actual* good (which is what she is defining) *cannot* exist apart from one's cognitive efforts (and the concrete context or "nexus" one is in), even though the *potential* good *can* exist apart from cognition. As said above, Rand is unwaveringly focused on *the actual*.

3. Normative Ethics

I will next focus on two further issues within normative ethics: conflicts of values and the proper beneficiary of actions. Rasmussen and Den Uyl maintain that Rand somehow "opens the door to the possibility of conflict" (p. 34). Although Rand denies that this is possible,¹⁰ Rasmussen and Den Uyl take issue with her, holding that "the possibility of righteous conflicts between individuals regarding their respective good cannot be ruled out as a matter of principle" (p. 35).

This seems, however, to involve a confusion between conflict and competition. As we ordinarily understand conflict between individuals, it involves some form of violation of one person's rights by another, either in the form of physical force or some kind of deception (fraud) that breaches an agreement to interact and pursue values in an informed and voluntary manner. Competition is more general in that it simply involves two (or more) parties pursuing the same goal that only one of them can attain.

For instance, two football teams both want to win the game, so they compete to see who can rack up the most points. We would not call this 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 team to play against. So long as everyone abides by the agreed-upon rules, there will be no conflict between individuals.

Do the two teams have a "conflict of *interest*" (to use Rand's term)? No. Their "righteous [i.e., rational] interest" is to do the best they

¹⁰ See Ayn Rand, "The 'Conflicts' of Men's Interests," in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 57–65.

can, *within the scope of the agreed-upon rules*—and to win, *if and only if they do better than the other team*. Competition and even a vigorous struggle are not equivalent to conflict. Wanting to play against a challenging opponent is a higher value than winning per se; otherwise, any ragtag bunch could play against their elderly grandparents and win!

In 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,¹¹ 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. This does not guarantee that other people’s choices and actions will always be correct or rational, but Rand carefully qualifies her view that there are “no conflict of interests” among “rational” men.

Finally, Rasmussen and Den Uyl claim that the Objectivist Ethics “treats the relationship between an individual and his self as the central consideration of normative ethics” (p. 34). This is a common misreading of the Objectivist Ethics. Rasmussen and Den Uyl are correct in saying, in *The Perfectionist Turn*, that relationship issues, while important, are simply not fundamental in ethics¹²—but Rand also says this. In the introduction to *The Virtue of Selfishness*, she states that “the choice of beneficiary of moral values” is neither “a criterion of moral value” nor “a moral primary.”¹³ Furthermore, however, she also states that man’s relation to himself, that is, his “concern with his own interests,” while not ethically fundamental, nonetheless is real and

¹¹ From the standpoint of Individualistic Perfectionism and the Template of Responsibility, this would be ruled out because it makes relationships with others, rather than the seeking of one’s well-being and the creating of one’s best self, of primary concern.

¹² Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen, *The Perfectionist Turn: From Metanorms to Metaethics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 35.

¹³ Ayn Rand, “Introduction,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1964), p. x.

important and derives from “the reasons why man needs a moral code.”¹⁴ Without such a code, Rand says, man cannot live his best life and make it what it can and ought to be. He cannot “choose his actions, values and goals by the standard of that which is proper to man,” and thus he cannot “achieve, maintain, fulfill and enjoy that ultimate value, that end in himself, which is his own life.”¹⁵ In other words, individualist self-perfection is not possible without paying proper attention to one’s own rational interests.

However, once making one’s own life better and better is firmly set as one’s primary moral focus, *then* the question becomes: How are you, *given the value of certain special others to you*, to carry out your responsibility to live well this one and only life of your own? This crucial practical concern logically requires not that one *disregard* the benefit to and well-being of others—that is a gross caricature of Rand’s ethics—but 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.

Thus, being your own core beneficiary—though emphatically *not* the basic doctrine in Rand’s ethics—is nonetheless a legitimate *derivative* concern, a necessary *implication and condition* of living the life proper to a human being. One cannot enjoy *one’s own* one and only life, if one does not include oneself as at least one of the beneficiaries of any given action.

In this context, we can see how a related claim also falls short of the target. 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.”¹⁶ True enough, she says this; furthermore, it is absolutely correct, even on Individualist Perfectionist terms, as I will explain below. What is not correct is

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” p. 27.

¹⁶ Rand, “Introduction,” in Rand, *Virtue of Selfishness*, p. x (first emphasis added by Rasmussen and Den Uyl).

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" (p. 35 n. 35, emphasis added). Rand did not say or "require" this nor that man must act only for *his own* rational self-interest. Indeed, she would have protested vehemently that she had given more than ample illustration that she did not advocate living one's life as a self-sufficient island, viewing others as nothing more than a multitude of utilitarian means to one's own ends or a vast resource to be treated impersonally and callously exploited.¹⁷

If one betrays either oneself or others one values, one undercuts the self/soul one is fashioning, *which will not do*; so Rand clearly holds that the latter, not the beneficiary issue, is more basic. As she argues, in making the myriad choices that serve that primary ethical task, one *must* always include oneself (though *not only* oneself). To do otherwise would be self-destructive, both of one's life (the source of one's values and capacity to value) and of one's self-esteem (one's regarding oneself as noble and as worthy of living and being happy). Thus, we see that Rand has indeed arrived at "A New Concept of Egoism" (the subtitle of *The Virtue of Selfishness*), one which sees self-benefit not as the *core* of ethics, but as a *necessary condition for supporting that core*: one's self-perfection as a rational individual.¹⁸

In summary, I find that the differences between Individualistic Perfectionism and Objectivist Ethics are considerably less extensive than Rasmussen and Den Uyl have made them out to be.

¹⁷ For that matter, as noted more briefly above, beneficiary is not a non-issue for Rasmussen and Den Uyl either. Although, as they state, "IP does not make relationships *primary*" (p. 35, emphasis added), their ethics does make relationships *subordinate to* the living of one's own life and the making of one's own self/soul, which is one's primary ethical responsibility.

¹⁸ I am grateful to Becky Bissell, Vinay Kolhatkar, and the editors of this journal for their assistance on earlier versions of this discussion note.