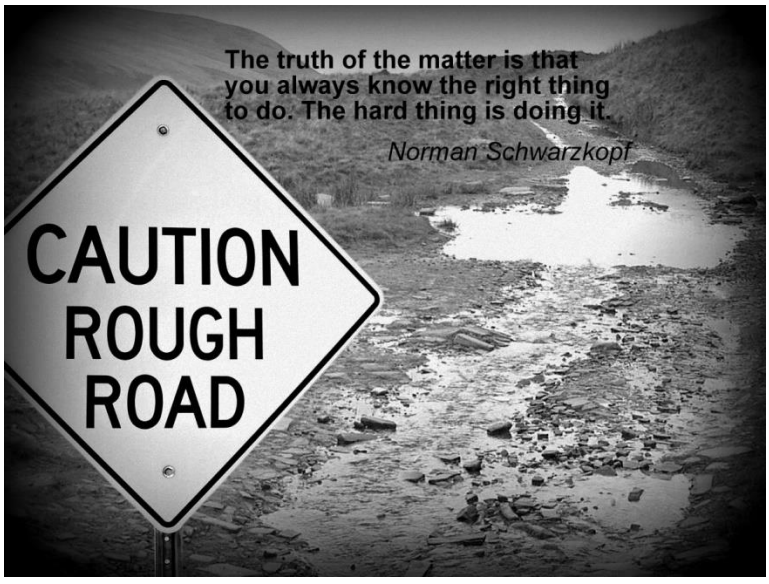
PART THREE

THE SCIENCE OF MORAL REASONING

ETHICAL REASONING

A MAN WITHOUT ETHICS IS A WILD BEAST LOOSED UPON THIS WORLD.

(ALBERT CAMUS)



One might look at the division of philosophical labor the way the great philosopher Immanuel Kant did. He divided it into three, depending on what *sort* of reasoning was being analyzed. ***Pure*** reason, for Kant, has to do with logic, metaphysics, epistemology and related issues. It looked at how reasoning itself functioned, from different angles. Loosely speaking, this is the stuff we explored in the last section of this textbook: issues about what is metaphysically possible, what we can know, and what sorts of things we actually are.

Practical reason, for Kant, has to do with applied reasoning. We'd see this as the domain of ethics and political theory. *How should I live?* was Kant's question. This is the stuff of this final textbook section.* There are a number of ways one might answer that deceptively simple question. But before we get ensnarled in that complicated issue, let's define some important terms.

The first thing we'll find out is that there are a few terms we need to distinguish from each other. For example,

> *Some activity A is **moral** iff A can either*
> *a) be described as meeting some standard of right conduct, or*
> *b) be proscribed as necessary for right conduct.*

That is to say that we might look *backwards* (description) or *forwards* (proscription) on actions and evaluate them as either acceptable (described as morally praiseworthy) or necessary. If we are saying that somebody *must do A*—that is, we're setting the standards for right conduct, then we're also introducing the next term, which happens to applying the term *moral* to a different domain:

> *Somebody S is **moral** iff S has that quality of acting or being in accord with standards of right conduct.*

Whereas before we were applying the term to the domain of *actions*, now we're looking at *agents*. Certainly there's something quite different between the criteria for some event (specifically, an action) to be moral

Ethical Thinking

Ethics is the study of what is good, or right behavior. Those who pursue ethics want to know what the right course of action is to take—want to find a pathway that is morally justifiable. But what counts as moral justification?

To answer that, we need first to understand what is meant by ***justification***. This is an epistemological term that grasps that notion of what makes for a good reason to have some belief or belief set. Roughly speaking, it is the account one has for holding the beliefs one holds, must like an argument's premises are the account for the truth of the conclusion it has. It is important to distinguish between any old story one might have to "justify" one's beliefs and something that counts as justification.

We might refer back to chapter 4 where we noted that the definition of an argument is the definition of a *good* argument. Somebody might offer an argument that once analyzed fails dismally. In which case, one might justifiably say, "you have no argument for your case," meaning, "you don't have a good argument." In the same way, one might offer a set of reasons that don't directly link to the *having* of that belief.

continued…

* And so as not to leave you hanging, Kant's third area was *judgment*, or the realm of aesthetic reasoning. If you're interested in exploring this kind of reasoning, it's the stuff of literary theory, art or music criticism, and many other cultural studies often generally labelled the *Humanities*. Go now and take a Humanities course. You'll be glad you did.

and those for some person to be moral. And in fact, we'll see that there are different approaches to studying moral goodness, depending on whether one focuses on actions or on agents.

ETHICS AND MORALITY

This moves us into a pretty big question. What's the difference between *ethics* and *morality*? One rule of thumb I've seen is that morality has to do with how you treat people you know, and ethics has to do with how you treat people you don't know. That might be helpful so far as it goes, but surely we seek to have some sort of standard that governs *all* of our behavior consistently. Say you determine that it is right conduct to treat some stranger S in manner M. So you do M to S, and that's good ethics. As chance has it, you get to know S while doing M, and suddenly, S is not some stranger any longer. Magically, doing M is good morals. But then, where's the line between M as ethical and M as moral? This distinction is way too fuzzy. Not good enough for us.

Another way to think about it is somewhat more helpful. One might say that morality has to do with how we think about what is intuitively right or wrong whereas ethics has to do with how we establish *standards* of morality. In this sense, morality comes almost naturally—at least, they're instilled socially by norms and customs. This is the stuff of kindergarteners loudly insisting on what is fair or not. On the other hand, ethics is the stuff of trying to figure out *why* certain behaviors and actions are morally acceptable and others are not.

Aristotle, when writing about ethics, noted that in some areas of study—like mathematics, physics, or biology—one has to set precise measurements and definitions. But there other areas of study—medicine, politics, and ethics—where things are true "for the most part." And, he notes,

> *Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the products of the crafts. Now fine and just actions, which political science investigates, admit of much variety and fluctuation of opinion, so that they may be thought to exist only by convention, and not by nature. And goods also give rise to a similar fluctuation because they bring harm to many people; for before now men have been undone by reason of their wealth, and others by reason of their courage. We must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premisses to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true and with premisses of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better. In the same spirit, therefore, should each type of statement be received; for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs.*[*]

[*] *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1, ch. 3. *Transl.* W. D. Ross.

ETHICAL THINKING, *continued.*

Sometimes it is actions, and not beliefs, that we seek to justify. In such cases, justification will work much like an argument, with the reasons for doing that action working to support the action like premises support a conclusion. We'll say that

> *The doing of action A is **justified** iff doing A is sufficiently defended with reasons that a supremely knowledgeable and rational person can accept as relevant to and conclusive for the acceptance of A.*

This isn't to say that there are in fact supremely rational people out there. Rather, it's saying that the justification is not vulnerable to prejudices or limited to the knowledge of the observer. It's saying that a person who was not reasoning poorly, who was not making mistakes, and who was privy to all relevant information would find the reasons to be a good support for doing action A.

Some actions have moral weight. These actions need a special kind of consideration. In specifically ethical contexts, one might offer an explanation for why one does what one does that is, strictly speaking, not a justification.

Rather, it's supplementary information that perhaps enables us to understand why certain actions were undertaken. Justification is more than that.

continued…

'WHAT'S YOURS?'

It follows that we will be entering, in this last section of our philosophical exploration, a domain of more-or-less, not all-or-nothing. The question that will always linger behind every discussion will be whether the theory at hand is adequate for the majority of the tasks it is supposed to be weighing. That is, if the standard posited by the theory at hand doesn't adequately determine what is good conduct or morally praiseworthy for a reasonable majority of cases, then we'll have to discard that theory. A correlating question that will guide us is whether this theory loses usefulness if it is found to fail to meet universal applicability, and if not, how it can then be reconciled to or partnered with other theories that answer the questions it cannot.

Thinking ethically is not passive. Each decision one makes is morally charged. What do we eat? Where do we shop? To whom do we offer financial assistance? What obligations do we have? What do we wear? How do we commute? What justification can we offer for our recreational purchases? Each of these are ethical questions that, whether or not we consciously ask them, we answer every day. And by answering them in our everyday living, we establish what we *in fact* believe is morally acceptable. This last part of the book will force us to determine whether what we unconsciously believe is consistent with what we claim to value, whether it is justifiable by an acceptable ethical standard, and whether it is something we wish to continue believing as careful critical reasoners.

ETHICAL THINKING, *continued.*

We'll say that when an action A is morally significant, the justification necessary for doing or not doing A must include morally significant reasons.

But what count as morally significant reasons? That, we'll soon see, is a very complicated question.

THEORIES & PSEUDO-THEORIES

Ethics is the science of right and wrong. That might seem overstated; it's not. One might think—*how can ethics be as absolute as* ***science****?*

One might think that, but one would be confused. You see, *science* is not absolute. Science is one of those disciplines whose conclusions are *probable* (not *certain*). Science is always learning more, getting closer, double-checking, testing and retesting. Improving.

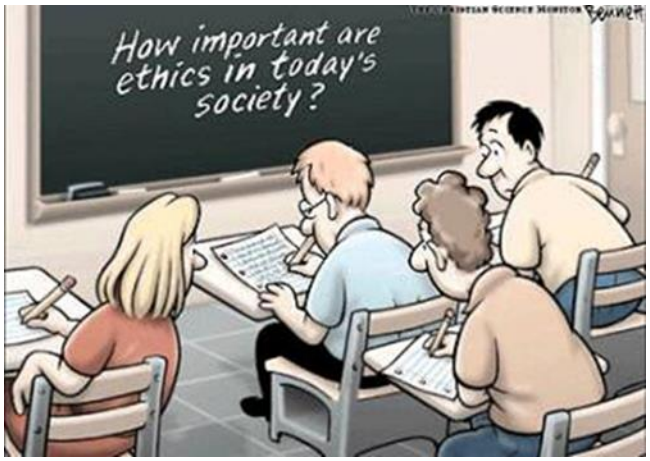
Science is a discipline of growth. It posits hypotheses, then tests them. If they are confirmed, they are then upgraded to theories. Recall that

> *x is a* ***theory*** *iff x is a set of testable and tested theorems (claims) and principles that together explain a set of phenomena or facts.*[*]

Ethical theories, then, are, like scientific and mathematical theories, *testable*. And to have any value, they have explanatory power.[†]

[*] See chapters 14 and 15 for more on theories (specifically, theories of mind and theories of perceptual knowledge).

[†] See chapter 9 on the hypothetico-deductive method and the criteria of a hypothesis.



Of course, not all of the things presented as theories measure up. Some ideas in science were untestable—like the medieval theory of homunculi (little bitty persons that lived in human brains to communicate external information to our minds), or proven wrong—like the theory of phlogiston (combustible material that blows up and is released from objects when they burn).

When a theory *cannot be tested* or is maintained even after having been demonstrated false, it is called a ***pseudo-theory***. Thus, it is possible that a theory can be demoted to pseudo-theory—like the psueudo-theory that the earth is flat, which is still unfortunately held and defended on some very bizarre web sites.

One can, as a rule of thumb, distinguish between theories and pseudo-theories by looking at the purpose of the theory and its relationship to intellectual honesty. If an account is designed to be tested, confirmed or disconfirmed, and can explain all the relevant facts, intuitions, or phenomena without unjustified (or unjustifiable) logical leaps—that is, if a theory adheres to Occam's Razor,* then it is most likely a theory.

If, on the other hand, the account is designed to be unquestioned, or if it is itself a rationalization of a previously-held and untestable view, then it is most likely a pseudo-theory.

Pseudo-Theories in Ethics

If you're not careful, you might fall into the mistaken thinking that ethics is like pseudo-science—a way of justifying what you want to be the case, rather than like good science—a way of finding out how things really are, whether or not it always bounces in our favor. Real ethics sometimes forces us to change our beliefs and behavior. It sometimes hurts.

But because we are often pulled by popular thinking, we have to see these influential accounts. So we'll start our ethical expedition by taking a side track into pseudo-theories, ethical accounts that fail the theory test. Each of these are ***subjective*** accounts—theories that hold that morality is based on what specific individuals or groups believe. We'll see their appeal (hey, if it allows me to do what I want and feel good about myself, thumbs up!), and we'll see how they fail (alas).

Then we'll get down to serious matters, and look at different accounts that pass muster as theories, by being ***objective*** accounts—theories that hold there is some standard of rightness and wrongness that applies to all human beings, no matter who or where or when they are.

Yes, we'll find trouble spots. Sure, we'll find uncertainties. But of course, we find such things in science, too. Like Aristotle reminds us, we will in this ethical expedition, note always that ethics is a *practical* science, requiring a flexible knowledge of what is "for the most part" (probability). In this way, we'll attempt to avoid that foolishness of seeking for the sort of conclusion this kind of discipline can never legitimately offer.

* See chapter 9. In short, Occam's Razor says that the account that explains all the necessary phenomena with the fewest leaps of logic is to be preferred over any other account.

I THINK YOU HAVE A MORAL RESPONSIBILITY WHEN YOU'VE BEEN GIVEN MORE THAN YOU NEED, TO DO WISE THINGS WITH IT AND GIVE INTELIGENTLY.

(J.K. ROWLING)

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SUBJECTIVE ETHICAL THEORIES

THE CONTENT AND PURPOSE OF CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Before we can truly see what counts as good ethical theory, we need to confront and dismantle the pseudo-ethics we often find so hypnotically tempting. That's, in short, the whole of chapter sixteen.

We'll start by analyzing a pseudo-theory that is increasingly popular among well-intentioned persons who wish to respect and embrace diversity: cultural relativism. Specifically, we'll see two kinds: *descriptive* and *normative* cultural relativism, and we'll see that whereas the former is an accurate assessment of the myriad cultures around the world, the inference to the latter is invalid, and in fact, we have very good reasons to utterly reject it as an ethical system.

The second approach we'll look at is another well-meaning one. But it is based on an untestable principle which makes it, too, a pseudo-theory. It'll show us just how easy it is for very good thinkers to make very big mistakes.

The third approach is one that is widely embraced by American politicians and businessmen, but it, too, fails both the logic test and the verification earned by successful application. In fact, although the thinker who proposed this never saw it applied nationally, we have since seen both its systematic application and the disastrous results of this worldview when embraced by those in power.

Thus, although each of these systems are only pseudo-theories, we'll find them influential nonetheless, and demanding our attention before we can proceed into a truly objective and fruitful exploration of ethical theory.

LAWS AND PRINCIPLES ARE NOT FOR THE TIMES WHEN THERE IS NO TEMPTATION: THEY ARE FOR SUCH MOMENTS AS THIS, WHEN BODY AND SOUL RISE IN MUTINY AGAINST THEIR RIGOUR ... IF AT MY CONVENIENCE I MIGHT BREAK THEM, WHAT WOULD BE THEIR WORTH?

(CHARLOTTE BRONTË)

READING QUESTIONS

As you study this chapter, use these questions for critical thinking and analysis.

- What is the difference between a theory and a pseudo-theory?
- What is moral justification? How might you explain this concept to a friend not taking this class? How is it different from one offering an explanation of why one did what one did?
- Explain the difference between *subjective* and *objective* moral standards.
- Rachels argues that cultural relativism is a failure. What is his argument? How does he demonstrate the logical problems with it—specifically, how does he argue that NCR is wrong and the **CDA** (Cultural Differences Argument) fails?
- What is the *Is-Ought Problem*?
- Explain the difference between NCR and NSR.
- What are some of the important consequences of NCR?
- How does NCR relate to the notion of cultural tolerance? Must we endorse NCR to preserve diversity or the acceptance of various practices?

continued…

FOUNDATIONS

The following are some key ideas and concepts we'll deal with in this chapter.

- There are two ways to understand the philosophical term *subjectivism* in ethics.*
  - One refers to a specific ethical approach that in this chapter we'll call *Normative Subjective Relativism* (NSR).
  - The other refers to the kind of criteria that are used to justify an action as morally acceptable. If the criteria are dependent on specific individuals or communities holding them (rather than being something that, in principle, can apply to all human beings), the ethical theory in question is called subjective.
- *Descriptive* and *Normative* theories are very different. The former are ***observations***. The latter are ***proscriptive***—that is, they assign a normative value or moral weight to actions. Whereas the former say how things *are*, the latter say how things *ought to be*.
- Arguments are composed entirely of statements, that is, sentences that carry a truth value. If a sentence has no truth value, then it cannot be a part of an argument.
- The Verification Principle is a criterion used by a group of philosophers called *logical positivists*. It is used to determine whether a sentence is truth evaluable.
- Analytic statements are statements whose truth value is determined by the grammar of the sentence itself—by the meaning of the terms.
- Synthetic statements are statements whose truth value are determined by looking at the relationship between the statement and the world.
- Psychological Egoism (PE and its variants) is a descriptive theory, whereas Ethical Egoism (EE), represented in this chapter primarily by Ayn Rand's "Objectivism" is a normative theory.

Tasks & Critical Questions

This chapter contains ***one task*** and ***three critical questions***. There is ***one team project***.

THE WORD *GOOD* HAS MANY MEANINGS. FOR EXAMPLE, IF A MAN WERE TO SHOOT HIS GRANDMOTHER AT A RANGE OF FIVE HUNDRED YARDS, I SHOULD CALL HIM A GOOD SHOT, BUT NOT NECESSARILY A GOOD MAN.

(G.K. CHESTERTON)

READING QUESTIONS,

continued.

- How does Ayer argue that ethical sentences are not truth-evaluable statements?
- Explain the difference between *analytic* and *synthetic* statements. How does one determine the truth value of an analytic statement? A synthetic statement (according to logical positivism)? Write as if explaining it to a friend who's not taken this class.
- What is the difference between *illocution* and *perlocution*?
- Explain the Verification Principle (VP) as if to a friend not taking this class.
- What problem does Ayer find in a sentence like "You shouldn't stab somebody in the eye with a bayonet"?
- Explain emotivism as an ethical theory. How is emotivism a subjectivist ethics?
- Why does it seem that the VP is either incoherent or false (and probably the former)?
- Explain the **LMD** argument. How does it attempt to salvage emotivism? Does it work? Why or why not?
- How would you reach a conclusion from an incoherent principle that the argument needing it is bad? (That is, how can you move from not-truth evaluable to false?)

continued…

* If you *really* want to get down to brass tacks, *subjectivism* is an epistemological term that holds all true knowledge to be limited to experiences had by oneself. Thus subjectivist ethics branches out from this, holding that moral beliefs or judgments are statements concerning the attitudes or conventions of the individual. It is thus a form of relativism, as we'll see below.

SUBJECTIVE VS. OBJECTIVE STANDARDS

Some think that the only morally significant reasoning is the reasoning held by the majority of members in the culture that is directly affected by a moral action. Among those, some think that no one outside of that affected culture can, as a consequence, make any reasonable assessment of the action in question: if you're not in the culture yourself, then you can't make any relevant judgment about any action that culture endorses or rejects. Moral judgments are constrained. Others think that even though the goodness or badness of an action is to be determined by how it affects all those it affects, it can be reasonably evaluated by one outside the affected area.

Some think that the whole notion of ethical theory is questionable. Morality, they say, is wholly individual—private. It's not something that can be communicated or measured. It's not like science or mathematics, and any attempt to systematize morality into ethical theories is bound to fall into incoherency—into crazy talk nonsense. Others believe that it is only our rationality that makes morality itself a coherent notion, and that therefore, it is obvious that we strive for universalizable theories.

This dualism between whether we can or cannot find a universal standard of morality—that is, whether the very notion of ethics is rational—is a struggle between two perspectives on morality: *objectivism* and *subjectivism.*[*]

Subjective theories hold that morality is wholly personal. For something to be ***subjective*** is for it to be completely dependent upon the perspective of a subject (an individual person). In contrast, objective theories hold that morality can be systematized, that ethics is a reasonable endeavor. That is, ***objective*** theories hold that there are universal principles that govern all human beings regarding what is right and what is wrong.

This gives us two important terms:[†]

> *An ethical theory T is **subjective** iff the standard of morality in T is considered dependent on the perspective of an individual person or group of people, and cannot be evaluated by anyone other than that individual person or group.*
>
> *An ethical theory T is **objective** iff the standard of morality in T is considered independent from any individual or group perspective, i.e., the standard is universal for all human beings.*

READING QUESTIONS, *continued*.

- What is the difference between *egoism* and *egotism*?
- Ayn Rand argues her theory is objective. Why? Why do we say it is subjective?
- What does Rand think solves the *Is-Ought Problem*?
- How does Rand define 'rational'?
- What does Rand mean by rational selfishness and altruism? How do these two relate?
- Explain the idea of ethics as fundamentally an economic one. How does Rand justify this? Test this thesis. Can you find a counterargument or any counterexamples?

continued…

[*] The term "objectivism" has been in use far longer than Ayn Rand has used it to describe her subjectivist theory. For this reason, when speaking about Rand's theory, I will continue using the term "ethical egoism," which is both clearer and more consistent within ethical discourse. The term "objectivist" is unique to Rand's self-description, so it will not be altered.

This said, I will not alter Rand's own words in quoted text when she uses the term "objectivism" to refer to ethical egoism.

Also, the term 'subjectivism' more carefully refers to the various forms of ethical relativism, to a specific set of theories. In this context, I am using the term to refer to those theories whose standards are specific to a certain individual or group. In this context, the term can be used more widely, since there are many ways in which individuals and groups can establish moral standards that are based on their own experience, feelings, traditions, emotions, or self-interests (as we will see).

[†] For a reminder on the distinction between subjective and objective beliefs and claims (closely related to the idea of subjective or objective *ethical* beliefs, claims, or theories), refer back to chapter 3.

We can contrast this by saying that subjective theories hold that the standard of morality is either applicable only to specific groups or persons or that (as Ayer holds) the making of a standard is itself impossible.

Most subjectivist accounts—like Normative Cultural Relativism, Psychological Egoism, and Ethical Egoism—are so poorly reasoned that they fall into the same camp as ***pseudoscience.*** Others—like Emotivism—fall into the camp simply by being untestable, unverifiable. Pseudoscience is that worldview which either fails to carefully test a hypothesis or is based on unverifiable claims. That is, it fails Poppers falsifiability criterion.* Some pseudoscience is simply the product of fallacies and cognitive biases. We'll see that the ethical theories in this chapter can be accurately called ***Pseudo-theories*** for the same reasons.

We'll start by considering subjective perspectives, and—spoiler alert—we'll see why they fail. Our first look is into a form of moral relativism called *cultural* relativism.

CRITICAL QUESTIONING

By the way, you are to write a Critical Question on the following text by Rachels. Recall the criteria of a CQ:†

1. Write a carefully-organized paragraph, in which you
2. express a question about the reading that is relevant to the issues being considered, and then
3. explain the importance of this particular question (given all the others you likely also had while reading). Finally,
4. Attempt to *answer* that question from the perspective of the author of the text, given what you do understand from the reading.
5. You will, of course, need to somehow, in the writing of the CQ, demonstrate that you actually read the text and didn't "point and click" a random question to write about.

READING QUESTIONS, *continued*.

- How might a society of human beings not be a *'human* society,' according to Rand? What worries might this bring in a multi-layered, multi-ethnic, post-colonial society?
- What is the difference between psychological and ethical egoism?
- Explain three arguments for psychological egoism (PE). How do they work, and why do they ultimately fail?
- What is hedonism?
- Explain the two thought experiments, *Forgetful Jones* and *No Pain No Gain*. How do they test PEH?
- What is the paradox of hedonism?
- How does one argue from PE to ethical egoism (EE)?
- Does Rand argue from PE to EE?
- Nozick carefully argues against Randian EE. He challenges every claim in the argument **OE**. How does Rand argue for each claim, and how does Nozick respond to each of her arguments? Be sure to treat each claim in turn.
- Nozick presents a sympathetic reworking of Rand's EE, an argument we've dubbed **SYMPATHETIC**. How does it work, and is it valid or sound? In short, even with an attempted reworking of Rand's ethics, do we get the ethical system she wants? Does it work even after being reworked?

* For more on this, see chapter 9 of this text.

† These are carefully presented and discussed in chapter 2 of this textbook (right after the *Euthyphro* reading).

I CAN GUARANTEE YOU THAT YOU WILL ONLY GET OUT OF THE TEXT WHAT YOU PUT IN: IF YOU'RE DISTRACTED BY TV OR FACEBOOK OR ROWDY FRIENDS OR ENDLESS TEXTS, YOU WILL *NOT* GET THE READING. SILENCE YOUR PHONE. TURN OFF THE TV. LEAVE FACEBOOK. AND FOCUS.

THE CHALLENGE OF CULTURAL RELATIVISM

James Rachels.[*]

Morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits. — Ruth Benedict *(Patterns of Culture, 1934)*

2.1 How Different Cultures Have Different Moral Codes

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Darius, a king of ancient Persia, was intrigued by the variety of cultures he encountered in his travels. He had found, for example, that the Callatians (a tribe of Indians) customarily ate the bodies of their dead fathers. The Greeks, of course, did not do that—the Greeks practiced cremation and regarded the funeral pyre as the natural and fitting way to dispose of the dead. Darius thought that a sophisticated understanding of the world must include an appreciation of such differences between cultures. One day, to teach this lesson, he summoned some Greeks who happened to be present at his court and asked them what they would take to eat the bodies of their dead fathers. They were shocked, as Darius knew they would be, and replied that no amount of money could persuade them to do such a thing. Then Darius called in some Callatians, and while the Greeks listened asked them what they would take to burn their dead fathers' bodies. The Callatians were horrified and told Darius not even to mention such a dreadful thing.

This story, recounted by Herodotus in his History illustrates a recurring theme in the literature of social science: Different cultures have different moral codes. What is thought right within one group may be utterly abhorrent to the members of another group, and vice versa. Should we eat the bodies of the dead or burn them? If you were a Greek, one answer would seem obviously correct; but if you were a Callatian, the opposite would seem equally certain.

It is easy to give additional examples of the same kind. Consider the Eskimos. They are a remote and inaccessible people. Numbering only about 25,000, they live in small, isolated settlements scattered mostly along the northern fringes of North America and Greenland. Until the beginning of the 20th century, the outside world knew little about them. Then explorers began to bring back strange tales.

Eskimos customs turned out to be very different from our own. The men often had more than one wife, and they would share their wives with guests, lending them for the night as a sign of hospitality. Moreover, within a community, a dominant male might demand and get regular

[*] Adapted from chapter 2 of James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc. 1999). p. 15-29.

sexual access to other men's wives. The women, however, were free to break these arrangements simply by leaving their husbands and taking up with new partners—free, that is, so long as their former husbands chose not to make trouble. All in all, the Eskimo practice was a volatile scheme that bore little resemblance to what we call marriage.

But it was not only their marriage and sexual practices that were different. The Eskimos also seemed to have less regard for human life. Infanticide, for example, was common. Knud Rasmussen, one of the most famous early explorers, reported that be met one woman who bad borne 20 children but had killed 10 of them at birth. Female babies, he found, were especially liable to be destroyed, and this was permitted simply at the parents' discretion, with no social stigma attached to it. Old people also, when they became too feeble to contribute to the family, were left out in the snow to die. So there seemed to be, in this society, remarkably little respect for life.

To the general public, these were disturbing revelations. Our own way of living seems so natural and right that for many of us it is hard to conceive of others living so differently. And when we do hear of such things, we tend immediately to categorize those other peoples as "backward" or "primitive." But to anthropologists and sociologists, there was nothing particularly surprising about the Eskimos. Since the time of Herodotus, enlightened observers have been accustomed to the idea that conceptions of right and wrong differ from culture to culture. If we assume that our ideas of right and wrong will be shared by all peoples as all times, we are merely naive.

2.2 Cultural Relativism

To many thinkers, this observation—"Different cultures have different moral codes"— has seemed to be the key to understanding morality. The

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idea of universal truth in ethics, they say, is a myth. The customs of different societies are all that exist. These customs cannot be said to be "correct" or "incorrect," for that implies we have an independent standard of right and wrong by which they may be judged. But there is no such independent standard; every standard is culture-bound. The great pioneering sociologist William Graham Sumner, writing in 1906, put the point like this:

The "right" way is the way which the ancestors used and which has been handed down. The tradition is its own warrant. It is not held subject to verification by experience. The notion of right is in the folkways. It is not outside of them, of independent origin, and brought to test them. In the folkways, whatever is, is right. This is because they are traditional, and therefore contain in themselves the authority of the ancestral ghosts. When we come to the folkways we are at the end of our analysis.

This line of thought has probably persuaded more people to be skeptical about ethics than any other single thing. Cultural Relativism, as it has been called, challenges our ordinary belief in the objectivity and universality of moral truth. It says, in effect, that there is not such thing as universal truth in ethics; there are only the various cultural codes, and nothing more. Moreover, our own code has no special status; it is merely one among many.

As we shall see, this basic idea is really a compound of several different thoughts. It is important to separate the various elements of the theory because, on analysis, some parts turn out to be correct, while others seem to be mistaken. As a beginning, we may distinguish the following claims, all of which have been made by cultural relativists:

1. Different societies have different moral codes.
2. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one societal code better than another.
3. The moral code of our own society has no special status; it is merely one among many.
4. There is no "universal truth" in ethics; that is, there are no moral truths that hold for all peoples at all times.
5. The moral code of a society determines what is right within that society; that is, if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then that action is right, at least within that society.
6. It is mere arrogance for us to try to judge the conduct of other peoples. We should adopt an attitude of tolerance toward the practices of other cultures.

Although it may seem that these six propositions go naturally together, they are independent of one another, in the sense that some of them might be false even if others are true. In what follows, we will try to

identify what is correct in Cultural Relativism, but we will also be concerned to expose what is mistaken about it.

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2.3 The Cultural Differences Argument

Cultural Relativism is a theory about the nature of morality. At first blush it seems quite plausible. However, like all such theories, it may be evaluated by subjecting it to rational analysis; and when we analyze Cultural Relativism we find that it is not so plausible as it first appears to be.

The first thing we need to notice is that at the heart of Cultural Relativism there is a certain form of argument. The strategy used by cultural relativists is to argue from facts about the differences between cultural outlooks to a conclusion about the status of morality. Thus we are invited to accept this reasoning:

1. The Greeks believed it was wrong to eat the dead, whereas the Callatians believed it was right to eat the dead.

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2. Therefore, eating the dead is neither objectively right nor objectively wrong. It is merely a matter of opinion, which varies from culture to culture.

Or, alternatively:

1. The Eskimos see nothing wrong with infanticide, whereas Americans believe infanticide is immoral.

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2. Therefore, infanticide is neither objectively right nor objectively wrong. It is merely a matter of opinion, which varies from culture to culture.

Clearly, these arguments are variations of one fundamental idea They are both special cases of a more general argument, which says:

1. Different cultures have different moral codes.

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2. Therefore, there is no objective "truth" in morality. Right and wrong are only matters of opinion, and opinions vary from culture to culture.

We may call this the ***Cultural Differences Argument***. To many people, it is persuasive. But from a logical point of view, is it sound?

It is not sound. The trouble is that the conclusion does not follow from the premise— that is, even if the premise is true, the conclusion still might be false. The premise concerns what people believe. In some societies, people believe one thing; in other societies, people believe differently. The conclusion, however, concerns what really is the case. The trouble is that this sort conclusion does not follow logically from this sort of premise.

Consider again the example of the Greeks and Callatians. The Greeks believed it was wrong to eat the dead; the Callatians believed it was right. Does it follow, from the mere fact that they disagreed, that there is no

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objective truth in the matter? No, it does not follow; for it could be that the practice was objectively right (or wrong) and that one or the other of them was simply mistaken.

To make the point clearer, consider a different matter In some societies, people believe the earth is flat In other societies, such as our own, people believe the earth is (roughly) spherical. Does it follow, from the mere fact that people disagree, that there is no "objective truth" in geography? Of course not; we would never draw such a conclusion because we realize that, in their beliefs about the world, the members of some societies might simply be wrong. There is no reason to think that if the world is round everyone must know it. Similarly, there is no reason to think that if there is moral truth everyone must know it. The fundamental mistake in the Cultural Differences Argument is that it attempts to derive a substantive conclusion about a subject from the mere fact that people disagree about it.

This is a simple point of logic, and it is important not to misunderstand it. We are not saying (not yet, anyway) that the conclusion of the argument is false. It is still an open question whether the conclusion is true or false. The logical point is just that the conclusion does not follow from the premise. This is important, because in order to determine whether the conclusion is true, we need arguments in its support. Cultural Relativism proposes this argument, but unfortunately the argument turns out to be fallacious. So it proves nothing.

2.4 The Consequences of Taking Cultural Relativism Seriously

Even if the Cultural Differences Argument is invalid, Cultural Relativism might still be true. What would it be like if it were true?

In the passage quoted above, William Graham Sumner summarizes the essence of Cultural Relativism. He says that there is no measure of right and wrong other than the standards of one's society: "The notion of right is in the folkways. It is not outside of them, of independent origin, and brought to test them. In the folkways, whatever is, is right."

Suppose we took this seriously. What would be some of the consequences?

1. We could no longer say that the customs of other societies are morally inferior to our own. This, of course, is one of the main points stressed by Cultural Relativism. We would have to stop condemning other societies merely because they are "different:' So long as we concentrate on certain examples, such as the funerary practices of the Greeks and Callatians, this may seem to be a sophisticated, enlightened attitude.

However, we would also be stopped from criticizing other, less benign practices. Suppose a society waged war on its neighbors for the purpose of taking slaves. Or suppose a society was violently anti-Semitic and its

leaders set out to destroy the Jews. Cultural Relativism would preclude us from saying that either of these practices was wrong. We would not even be able to say that a society tolerant of Jews is better than the anti- Semitic society, for that would imply some sort of transcultural standard of comparison. The failure to condemn these practices does not seem enlightened; on the contrary, slavery and anti-Semitism seem wrong wherever they occur. Nevertheless, if we took Cultural Relativism seriously, we would have to regard these social practices as also immune from criticism.

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2. We could decide whether actions are right or wrong just by consulting the standards of our society. Cultural Relativism suggests a simple test for determining what is right and what is wrong: All one need do is ask whether the action is in accordance with the code of one's society. Suppose in 1975, a resident of South Africa was wondering whether his country's policy of apartheid—a rigidly racist system—was morally correct. All he has to do is ask whether this policy conformed to his society's moral code. If it did, there would have been nothing to worry about, at least from a moral point of view.

This implication of Cultural Relativism is disturbing because few of us think that our society's code is perfect; we can think of ways it might be improved. Yet Cultural Relativism would not only forbid us from criticizing the codes of other societies; it would stop us from criticizing our own. After all, if right and wrong are relative to culture, this must be true for our own culture just as much as for other cultures.

3. The idea of moral progress is called into doubt. Usually, we think that at least some social changes are for the better. (Although, of course, other changes may be for the worse.) Throughout most of Western history the place of women in society was narrowly circumscribed. They could not own property; they could not vote or hold political office; and generally they were under the almost absolute control of their husbands. Recently much of this has changed, and most people think of it as progress.

If Cultural Relativism is correct, can we legitimately think of this as progress? Progress means replacing a way of doing things with a better way. But by what standard do we judge the new ways as better? If the old ways were in accordance with the social standards of their time, then Cultural Relativism would say it is a mistake to judge them by the standards of a different time. Eighteenth-century society was, in effect, a different society from the one we have now. To say that we have made progress implies a judgment that present-day society is better, and that is just the sort of transcultural judgment that, according to Cultural Relativism, is impermissible.

Our idea of social reform will also have to be reconsidered. Reformers such as Martin Luther King, Jr., have sought to change their societies for the better. Within the constraints imposed by Cultural Relativism, there

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is one way this might be done. If a society is not living up to its own ideals, the reformer may be regarded as acting for the best: The ideals of the society are the standard by which we judge his or her proposals as worthwhile. But the "reformer" may not challenge the ideals themselves, for those ideals are by definition correct. According to Cultural Relativism, then, the idea of social reform makes sense only in this limited way.

These three consequences of Cultural Relativism have led many thinkers to reject it as implausible on its face. It does make sense, they say, to condemn some practices, such as slavery and anti-Semitism, wherever they occur. It makes sense to think that our own society has made some moral progress, while admitting that it is still imperfect and in need of reform. Because Cultural Relativism says that these judgments make no sense, the argument goes, it cannot be right.

2.5 Why There Is Less Disagreement Than It Seems

The original impetus for Cultural Relativism comes from the observation that cultures differ dramatically in their views of right and wrong. But just how much do they differ? It is true that there are differences. However, it is easy to overestimate the extent of those differences, Often, when we examine what seems to be a dramatic difference, we find that the cultures do not differ nearly as much as it appears.

Consider a culture in which people believe it is wrong to eat cows. This may even be a poor culture, in which there is not enough food; still, the cows are not to be touched. Such a society would appear to have values very different from our own. But does it? We have not yet asked why these people will not eat cows. Suppose it is because they believe that after death the souls of humans inhabit the bodies of animals, especially cows, so that a cow may be someone's grandmother. Now do we want to say that their values are different from ours? No; the difference lies elsewhere. The difference is in our belief systems, not in our values. We agree that we shouldn't eat Grandma; we simply disagree about whether the cow is (or could be) Grandma

The point is that many factors work together to produce the customs of a society. The society's values are only one of them. Other matters, such as the religions and factual beliefs held by its members, and the physical circumstances in which they must live, are also important. We cannot conclude, then, merely because customs differ, that there is a disagreement about values. The difference in customs may be attributable to some other aspects of social life. Thus there may be less disagreement about values than there appears to be.

Consider again the Eskimos, who often kill perfectly normal infants, especially girls. We do not approve of such things; a parent who killed a baby in our society would be locked up. Thus there appears to be a great difference in the values of our two cultures. But suppose we ask why the Eskimos do this. The explanation is not that they have less affection for

their children or less respect for human life. An Eskimo family will always protect its babies if conditions permit. But they live in a harsh environment, where food is in short supply. A fundamental postulate of Eskimos thought is: "Life is hard, and the margin of safety small:' A family may want to nourish its babies but be unable to do so.

As in many "primitive" societies, Eskimo mothers will nurse their infants over a much longer period of time than mothers in our culture. The child will take nourishment from its mother's breast for four years, perhaps even longer. So even in the best of times there are limits to the number of infants that one mother can sustain. Moreover, the Eskimos are a nomadic people—unable to farm, they must move about in search of food. Infants must be carried, and a mother can carry only one baby in her parka as she travels and goes about her outdoor work. Other family members help whenever they can.

Infant girls are more readily disposed of because, first, in this society the males are the primary food providers—they are the hunters, according to the traditional division of labor—and it is obviously important to maintain a sufficient number of food providers. But there is an important second reason as well. Because the hunters suffer a high casualty rate, the adult men who die prematurely far outnumber the women who die early. Thus if male and female infants survived in equal numbers, the female adult population would greatly outnumber the male adult population. Examining the available statistics, one writer concluded that "were it not for female infanticide…there would be approximately one-and-a-half times as many females in the average Eskimo local group as there are food-producing males."

So among the Eskimos, infanticide does not signal a fundamentally different attitude toward children. Instead, it is a recognition that drastic measures are sometimes needed to ensure the family's survival. Even then, however, killing the baby is not the first option considered. Adoption is common; childless couples are especially happy to take a more fertile couple's "surplus." Killing is only the last resort. I emphasize this in order to show that the raw data of the anthropologists can be misleading; it can make the differences in values between cultures appear greater than they are. The Eskimos' values are not all that different from our values. It is only that life forces upon them choices that we do not have to make.

2.6 How All Cultures Have Some Values in Common

It should not be surprising that, despite appearances, the Eskimos are protective of their children. How could it be otherwise? How could a group survive that did not value its young? It is easy to see that, in fact, all cultural groups must protect their infants:

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1. Human infants are helpless and cannot survive if they are not given extensive care for a period of years.
2. Therefore, if a group did not care for its young, the young would not survive, and the older members of the group would not be replaced. After a while the group would die out.

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3. Therefore, any cultural group that continues to exist must care for its young. Infants that are not cared for must be the exception rather than the rule.

Similar reasoning shows that other values must be more or less universal. Imagine what it would be like for a society to place no value at all on truth telling. When one person spoke to another, there would be no presumption at all that he was telling the truth for he could just as easily be speaking falsely. Within that society, there would be no reason to pay attention to what anyone says. (I ask you what time it is, and you say "Four o'clock:' But there is no presumption that you are speaking truly; you could just as easily have said the first thing that came into your head. So I have no reason to pay attention to your answer; in fact, there was no point in my asking you in the first place.) Communication would then be extremely difficult, if not impossible. And because complex societies cannot exist without communication among their members, society would become impossible. It follows that in any complex society there must be a presumption in favor of truthfulness. There may of course be exceptions to this rule: There may be situations in which it is thought to be permissible to lie. Nevertheless, there will be exceptions to a rule that is in force in the society.

Here is one further example of the same type. Could a society exist in which there was no prohibition on murder? What would this be like? Suppose people were free to kill other people at will, and no one thought there was anything wrong with it. In such a "society," no one could feel secure. Everyone would have to be constantly on guard. People who wanted to survive would have to avoid other people as much as possible. This would inevitably result in individuals trying to become as self-sufficient as possible— after all, associating with others would be dangerous. Society on any large scale would collapse. Of course, people might band together in smaller groups with others that they could trust not to harm them. But notice what this means: They would be forming smaller societies that did acknowledge a rule against murder: The prohibition of murder, then, is a necessary feature of all societies.

There is a general theoretical point here, namely, that there are some moral rules that all societies will have in common, because those rules are necessary for society to exist. The rules against lying and murder are two examples. And in fact, we do find these rules in force in all viable cultures. Cultures may differ in what they regard as legitimate exceptions to the rules, but this disagreement exists against a background of agreement on

the larger issues. Therefore, it is a mistake to overestimate the amount of difference between cultures. Not every moral rule can vary from society to society.

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2.7 Judging a Cultural Practice to Be Undesirable

In 1996, a 17-year-old girl named Fauziya Kassindja arrived at Newark International Airport and asked for asylum. She had fled her native country of Togo, a small west African nation, to escape what people there call excision.

Excision is a permanently disfiguring procedure that is sometimes called "female circumcision," although it bears little resemblance to the Jewish ritual. More commonly, at least in Western newspapers, it is referred to as "genital mutilation." According to the World Health Organization, the practice is widespread in 26 African nations, and two million girls each year are "excised." In some instances, excision is part of an elaborate tribal ritual, performed in small traditional villages, and girls look forward to it because it signals their acceptance into the adult world. In other instances, the practice is carried out by families living in cities on young women who desperately resist.

Fauziya Kassindja was the youngest of five daughters in a devoutly Muslim family. Her father, who owned a successful trucking business, was opposed to excision, and he was able to defy the tradition because of his wealth. His first four daughters were married without being mutilated. But when Fauziya was 16, he suddenly died. Fauziya then came under the authority of his father, who arranged a marriage for her and prepared to have her excised. Fauziya was terrified, and her mother and oldest sister helped her to escape. Her mother, left without resources, eventually had to formally apologize and submit to the authority of the patriarch she had offended.

Meanwhile, in America, Fauziya was imprisoned for two years while the authorities decided what to do with her. She was finally granted asylum, but not before she became the center of a controversy about how foreigners should regard the cultural practices of other peoples. A series of articles in the New York Times encouraged the idea that excision is a barbaric practice that should be condemned. Other observers were reluctant to be so judgmental—live and let live, they said; after all, our practices probably seem just as strange to them.

Suppose we are inclined to say that excision is bad. Would we merely be applying the standards of our own culture? If Cultural Relativism is correct, that is all we can do, for there is no cultural-neutral moral standard to which we may appeal. Is that true?

Is There a Culture-Neutral Standard of Right and Wrong?

There is, of course, a lot that can be said against the practice of excision. Excision is painful and it results in the permanent loss of sexual pleasure. Its short-term effects include hemorrhage, tetanus, and septicemia.

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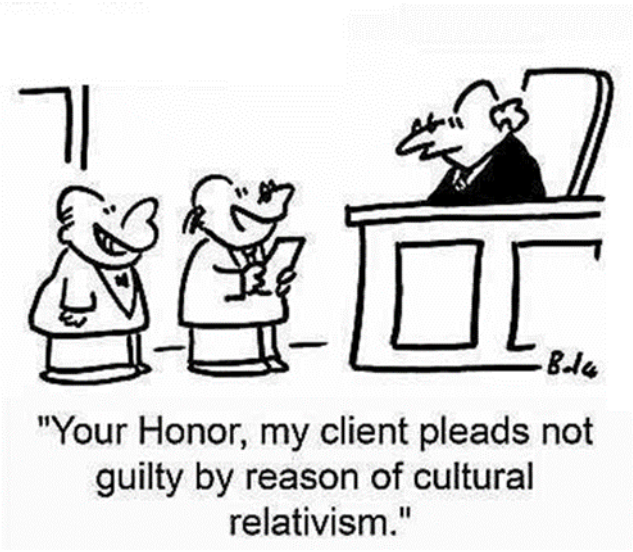
Sometimes the woman dies. Long term effects include chronic infection, scars that hinder walking, and continuing pain.



Why, then, has it become a widespread social practice? It is not easy to say. Excision has no obvious social benefits. Unlike Eskimo infanticide, it is not necessary for the group's survival. Nor is it a matter of religion. Excision is practiced by groups with various religions, including Islam and Christianity, neither of which commend it.

Nevertheless, a number of reasons are given in its defense. Women who are incapable of sexual pleasure are said to be less likely to be promiscuous; thus there will be fewer unwanted pregnancies in unmarried women. Moreover, wives for whom sex is only a duty are less likely to be unfaithful to their husbands; and because they will not be thinking about sex, they will be more attentive to the needs of their husbands and children. Husbands, for their part, are said to enjoy sex more with wives who have been excised. (The women's own lack of enjoyment is said to be unimportant.) Men will not want unexcised women, as they are unclean and immature. And above all, it has been done since antiquity, and we may not change the ancient ways.

It would be easy, and perhaps a bit arrogant, to ridicule these arguments. But we may notice an important feature of this whole line of reasoning: it attempts to justify excision by showing that excision is beneficial— men, women, and their families are all said to be better off when women are excised. Thus we might approach this reasoning, and excision itself, by asking which is true: Is excision, on the whole, helpful or harmful?

Here, then, is the standard that might most reasonably be used in thinking about excision: We may ask whether the practice promotes or hinders the welfare of the people whose lives are affected by it. And, as a corollary, we may ask if there is an alternative set of social arrangements that would do a better job of promoting their welfare. If so, we may conclude that the existing practice is deficient.

But this looks like just the sort of independent moral standard that Cultural Relativism says cannot exist. It is a single standard that may be brought to bear in judging the practices of any culture, at any time, including our own. Of course, people will not usually see this principle as being "brought in from the outside" to judge them, because, like the rules against lying and homicide, the welfare of its members is a value internal to all viable cultures.

Why Thoughtful People May Nevertheless Be Reluctant to Criticize Other Cultures.

Although they are personally horrified by excision, many thoughtful people are reluctant to say it is wrong, for at least three reasons.

First, there is an understandable nervousness about "interfering in the social customs of other peoples." Europeans and their cultural descendants in America have a shabby history of destroying native cultures in the name of Christianity and Enlightenment, not to mention self-interest. Recoiling from this record, some people refuse to make any negative judgments about other cultures, especially cultures that resemble those that have been wronged in the past. We should notice, however, that there is a difference between (a) judging a cultural practice to be morally deficient and (b) thinking that we should announce the fact, conduct a campaign, apply diplomatic pressure, or send in the army to do something about it. The first is just a matter of trying to see the world clearly, from a moral point of view. The second is another matter altogether. Sometimes it may be right to "do something about it," but often it will not be.

People also feel, rightly enough, that they should be tolerant of other cultures. Tolerance is, no doubt, a virtue—a tolerant person is willing to live in peaceful cooperation with those who see things differently. But there is nothing in the nature of tolerance that requires you to say that all beliefs, all religions, and all social practices are equally admirable. On the contrary, if you did not think that some were better than others, there would be nothing for you to tolerate.

Finally, people may be reluctant to judge because they do not want to express contempt for the society being criticized. But again, this is misguided: To condemn a particular practice is not to say that the culture is on the whole contemptible or that it is generally inferior to any other culture, including one's own. It could have many admirable features. In fact, we should expect this to be true of most human societies — they are mixes of good and bad practices. Excision happens to be one of the bad ones.

2.8 What Can Be Learned from Cultural Relativism

At the outset, I said that we were going to identify both what is right and what is wrong in Cultural Relativism. Thus far I have mentioned only its mistakes: I have said that it rests on an invalid argument, that it has consequences that make it implausible on its face, and that the extent of

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moral disagreement is far less than it implies. This all adds up to a pretty thorough repudiation of the theory. Nevertheless, it is still a very appealing idea, and the reader may have the feeling that all this is a little unfair. The theory must have something going for it, or else why has it been so influential? In fact, I think there is something right about Cultural Relativism, and now I want to say what that is. There are two lessons we should learn from the theory, even if we ultimately reject it.

Cultural Relativism warns us, quite rightly, about the danger of assuming that all our preferences are based on some absolute rational standard. They are not. Many (but not all) of our practices are merely peculiar to our society, and it is easy to lose sight of that fact. In reminding us of it, the theory does a service.

Funerary practices are one example. The Callatians, according to Herodotus, were "men who eat their fathers"—a shocking idea, to us at least. But eating the flesh of the dead could be understood as a sign of respect. It could be taken as a symbolic act that says: We wish this person's spirit to dwell within us. Perhaps this was the understanding of the Callatians. On such a way of thinking, burying the dead could be seen as an act of rejection, and burning the corpse as positively scornful. If this is hard to imagine, then we may need to have our imaginations stretched. Of course we may feel a visceral repugnance at the idea of eating human flesh in any circumstances. But what of it? This repugnance may be, as the relativists say, only a matter of what is customary in our particular society.

There are many other matters that we tend to think of in terms of objective right and wrong that are really nothing more than social conventions. Should women cover their breasts? A publicly exposed breast is scandalous in our society, whereas in other cultures it is unremarkable. Objectively speaking, it is neither right nor wrong—there is not objective reason why either custom is better. Cultural Relativism begins with the valuable insight that many of our practices are like this; they are only cultural products. Then it goes wrong by inferring that, because some practices are like this, all must be.

The second lesson has to do with keeping an open mind. In the course of growing up, each of us has acquired some strong feelings: We have learned to think of some types of conduct as acceptable, and others we have learned to reject. Occasionally, we may find those feelings challenged. We may encounter someone who claims that our feelings are mistaken. For example, we may have been taught that homosexuality is immoral, and we may feel quite uncomfortable around gay people and see them as alien and "different." Now someone suggests that this may be a mere prejudice; that there is nothing evil about homosexuality; that gay people are just people, like anyone else, who happen, through no choice of their own, to be attracted to others of the same sex. But because we feel so strongly about the matter, we may find it hard to take this seriously.

Even after we listen to the arguments, we may still have the unshakable feeling that homosexuals must, somehow, be an unsavory lot.

Cultural Relativism, by stressing that our moral views can reflect the prejudices of our society, provides an antidote for this kind of dogmatism. When he tells the story of the Greeks and Callatians, Herodotus adds:

> *For if anyone, no matter who, were given the opportunity of choosing from amongst all the nations of the world the set of beliefs which he thought best, he would inevitably, after careful consideration of their relative merits, choose that of his own country. Everyone without exception believes his own native customs, and the religion he was brought up in, to be the best.*

Realizing this can result in our having more open minds. We can come to understand that our feelings are not necessarily perceptions of the truth—they may be nothing more than the result of cultural conditioning. Thus when we hear it suggested that some elements of our social code is not really the best, and we find ourselves instinctively resisting the suggestion, we might stop and remember this. Then we may be more open to discovering the truth, whatever that might be.

We can understand the appeal of Cultural Relativism, then, even though the theory has serious shortcomings. It is an attractive theory because it is based on a genuine insight that many of the practices and attitudes we think so natural are really only cultural products. Moreover, keeping this insight firmly in view is important if we want to avoid arrogance and have open minds. These are important points, not to be taken lightly. But we can accept these points without going on to accept the whole theory.

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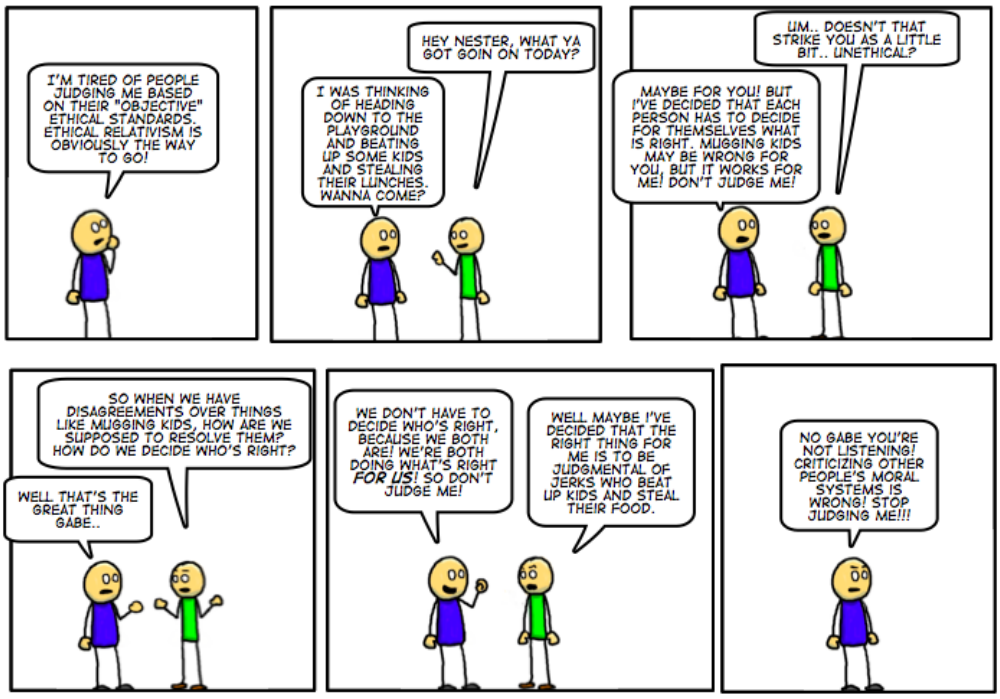

REVIEWING RACHEL'S ARGUMENT AGAINST CULTURAL RELATIVISM

To really see what Rachels is getting at, we'll want to pull out some terms (including theories) and carefully define them.* Right off the bat, we have *two* distinct claims that we need to take care to distinguish: ***Descriptive Cultural Relativism*** (DCR) and ***Normative Cultural Relativism*** (NCR).

DCR: *the anthropological thesis that different societies sanction different behaviors*

NCR: *the philosophical thesis that both*
(1) *moral judgments are meaningful only when applied to a specific cultural group (or society), and*
(2) *the moral rightness/wrongness of an act in that culture is determined wholly by the traditions, customs, and beliefs of that group.*

Notice how very different these are! DCR simply *describes* what people in different societies happen to believe about what is right or wrong, whereas NCR makes a claim about what in fact *is* morally right or wrong in different societies.

One might not see how NCR is actually a form of subjectivism, perhaps because it seems quite different from the blatant relativism we banished in chapter 2. One might think that relativism is really best understood in terms of "every man for himself." This is actually a view some hold, and we can more carefully call it ***Normative Subjective Relativism*** (NSR).†

NSR: *the philosophical thesis that both*
(1) *moral judgments are meaningful only when applied to specific individuals, and*
(2) *the moral rightness/wrongness of an act is wholly defined by that individual's beliefs.*

Well, when it's put this way, we can see how NSR and NCR are *both* subjective. One holds that morality is subjective since based entirely on personal beliefs or preferences, and the other holds that morality is subjective since based entirely on a specific culture's beliefs or preferences.

The Cultural Differences Argument

So how do we get from *describing* cultural differences in moral practice to *proscribing* a moral standard based on such differences?

This movement from description to proscription is called the movement from ***is*** to ***ought***. So the question I just stated can be asked more simply this way: how do we get an *ought* from an *is*? Scottish philosopher David Hume wrote of this problem in the 1700s:

> *In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprized to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, it is necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.* ‡

The ***is-ought problem*** is the question of granting legitimacy to a *proscription* on only the grounds of *description*. The world *is* such and such a way, and so it *ought* to be such and such a way. But Hume notes that it's not so evidently the case. The inference is suspect.§

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* I owe thanks to Patrick Kain for much of the general structure of this discussion.

† This is often simply called *subjectivism*.

‡ From *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, §I.

§ There's another very subtle approach to this problem offered by G.E. Moore in his *Principia Ethica*, §13. Here, Moore discusses what he calls the *naturalistic fallacy*, which comes from holding that either moral properties (e.g., 'goodness') are identical with natural properties

The argument used by cultural relativists reasons from *is* to *ought* in just this way. DCR tells us how it *is*; NCR tells us how things *ought* to be. But what justifies the movement from one to the other? Rachels helpfully shows us how relativists justify their moral thinking. He presents it as the ***Cultural Differences Argument*** (CDA). Abridged somewhat, it looks like this:

CDA

1. Different societies have different moral codes.

2. Therefore, the moral code of a society determines what is morally right or wrong in that society.

Notice right away that 1 (the premise) is simply a statement of DCR, while 2 (the conclusion) states NCR. Can you see how it moves from is to ought?

It is important here to see that NCR entails a correlative claim. If the moral code of a society determines what is right or wrong in that society, we can see that moral claims are *meaningless* unless applied to a specific society *by that society*. We'll call this a *culture index*. The culture index is the cultural context of a moral claim applied by a culture to itself. We can thus understand a little more about Normative Cultural Relativism: NCR holds that not only that

(1) *different cultures have different standards*, but also that
(2) *statements of morality are meaningless outside a culture index*.*

So the CDA is an argument that argues from a description of the diversity of moral practices in varying cultures to a claim that moral statements are meaningless unless indexed culturally.

But when we test this argument, we see that it is invalid. The premise is certainly true, but that truth doesn't *force* the conclusion to be true. That is, the *is-ought* problem rears its ugly head. We can't just jump from a description to a normative claim willy nilly.

We can try to improve the CDA by modifying it by making explicit the unstated belief that motivates 2:

CDA*

1. Different societies have different moral codes, and no moral principle is shared by all societies.

2. Therefore, the moral code of a society determines what is morally right or wrong in that society.

We'll call the premise DCR+, because it is Descriptive Cultural Relativism *plus* the unstated belief. CDA* seems more like what the people who endorse cultural relativism have in mind. But is it a valid argument?

Suppose 1 is true. Does that *force* 2 to be true? Well, no. Something more is required to guarantee 2, something like

1.1. If societies disagree about something x, then x is only a matter of custom/belief.
1.2. If x is the rightness/wrongness of an action, then what is right/wrong in a society is determined entirely by the customs/beliefs of that society.

(e.g., 'pleasurable' or 'socially acceptable') or are meaningless. His discussion shows that in order to demonstrate the moral property M is identical with a natural property N, one must first have in mind a belief that N is M (that, for example, pleasure is good). Then one can ask is it *good* (morally acceptable) to see N as M? And thus the question remains forever open, unanswerable. Since this question cannot ever be resolved, it follows that moral properties cannot be reduced or identified with natural properties, and to do so is to reason poorly (hence to commit a fallacy).

* Notice that NSR also has a corollary: that moral claims are meaningless without an analogous *subject index*. That is, moral claims, according to NSR, are meaningless unless applied to a specific individual (subject) *by* that individual.

So let's look at the argument again, modified once more to fill the logical gaps left by unreflective assumption:

CDA**

1. Different societies have different moral codes, and no moral principle is shared by all societies.
1.1. If societies disagree about something x, then x is only a matter of custom/belief.
1.2. If x is rightness/wrongness of an action, then what is right/wrong in a society is determined entirely by the customs/beliefs of that society.

2. Therefore, the moral code of a society determines what is morally right or wrong in that society.

Now we might actually have a valid argument. And this gives us our first insight: If we're seeking the truth, we must take great care to ensure our conclusions are legitimately derived from our evidence.* This seems obvious enough, but particularly in ethical discussions, it is especially easy to wander off into bad reasoning.

So to avoid bad reasoning, we need to remember our careful method of argument analysis: inference, validity (if deductive), truth, compellingness. So is this new argument valid? Well, it seems so. Now we ask whether the premises are true.

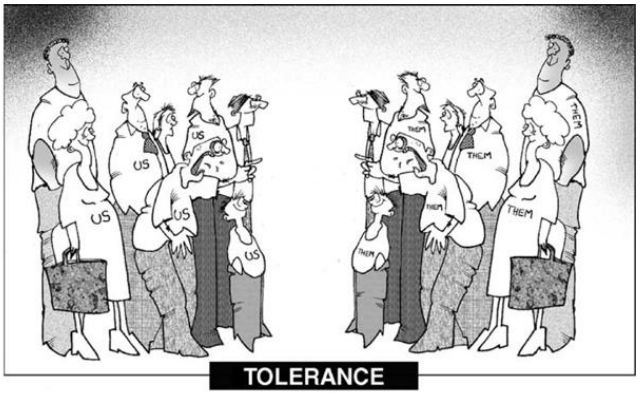
So are they?

Well, we have three premises to question. Let's consider. 1.1 and 1.2 claim something pretty strong. The first holds something like belief = truth. This we already know is nonsensical (see chapter 2). We know it is crazy talk because we know that *sometimes people are wrong.* We have false beliefs. And 1.2 builds on this by claiming not that different cultures can "agree to disagree," but that *everyone is right*. If culture A thinks x is bad, A is *right*; and if culture B thinks x is good, B is *also right*. Everybody wins. It's all good.

This is *not* saying that we can respect each other's differences yet still think the other is mistaken. *Nobody* is mistaken.

But this is also suspect. Surely cultures get it wrong sometimes. If not, then we cannot say that genocide, torture, female genital mutilation, or ritualized infanticide are immoral. Not if we wish to preserve our rationality. But we *do* wish both to preserve our rationality and to say that certain actions are wrong. No matter what society says. So we have little motivation to endorse 1.1 and 1.2 as true.

In fact, we can find counterexamples to 1.1. Here's one. Suppose one culture believes that the polio vaccine has no health benefits, rather, that doctors administering it are spies intending to undermine nations by murdering the children to whom they administer the vaccine.† This is easy enough to test. First, there is not only scientific but ample historic evidence that the vaccine indeed halts polio. And second, there is absolutely no evidence that the doctors administering the vaccine in poor countries have any ties at all to any governmental agencies. So we have societies that disagree about something, but that something isn't a reduced to a cultural belief but remains a matter of science and history.



We can thus see that 1.1 is not true. So CDA** is unsound. But to really drive this into the ground, let's look at 1.2, which is an extension of 1.1. It basically says that if that thing a society disagrees on is an issue of morality, then morality turns out to be subjective. Well, since we've demonstrated 1.1 false, we need not endorse 1.2. There is little reason to infer that disagreement always and evermore entails subjectivity.

That takes us back to premise 1. 1.1 and 1.2 became important in the attempt to unpack the addendum to DCR—that claim that "no moral principle is shared by all societies." This, too, requires proof. And in fact,

* Remember the Rules of Discourse!

† This is in fact what many Taliban extremists in Pakistan believe.

Rachels shows us clearly that the claim is false. The ***practices*** may be quite different, but the motivating ***principles*** that inform these practices line up. Rachels defends two claims that *contradict* DCR+ (premise 1).

Here are the two claims:

N: Certain general rules/values are *necessary* for a moderately complex society to function.

U: Every moderately complex society must share these general rules/values.

The first one we call *N* because it states a *necessary condition* for the functioning of a society, and the second one we call *U* because it is a universalization of N.

So consider what sorts of values or rules a society would need to remain functioning. We'd need to have things like honesty, currency, policing of some sort, and protection of the society's members. If these sorts of things weren't valued, the society would quickly crumble. We can generalize then, that since there are quite a few thriving societies out there, that they share these deep values and general rules. Thus, premise 1, the statement DCR+, is also false.

So not only is every form of the CDA faulty, but even when we carefully build a *valid* argument that infers NCR from DCR, we get nothing but false premises. It is hopelessly unsound.

Consequences of NCR

One important thing to note here is that even if the CDA is unsound, it might be the case that NCR is true. Like we noted in chapter 11, it is certainly possible to have an invalid, unsound, weak, or otherwise lacking argument with a *true* conclusion. What we have found here is *only* that the CDA (and its modifications) doesn't work.

So what if NCR is true? There are at least three consequences that we need to take into consideration.*

First, if NCR is true, then we cannot reasonably criticize other cultures.

This includes our own culture at different times. So if NCR is true, then to make any moral statement about a culture other than our own is to utter something meaningless. It would be *unreasonable* of us to say that the Rwandan genocide was wrong or that the South African Truth and Reconciliation process was admirable.

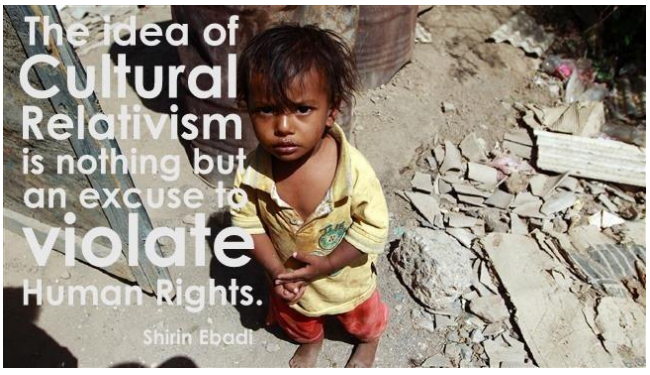
It would be nonsensical to try anyone for crimes against humanity at the Hague (unless the criminal was from the Netherlands), especially if that person was acting in accordance with the culture of his/her society. So the trials at Nuremberg were irrational (or at very least unreasonable). And backward-looking assessments of our own society at different times have no reasonable justification, since the culture of, say, 1820s America or 1750s America is different than that of early 21st Century America.

But these things seem eminently reasonable to us.

Closely related to this is the second consequence:

If NCR is true, then moral progress and radical reform are impossible.

Progress implies more than mere change. It implies that the new state of affairs is somehow *better* than the previous state. But If the current state of affairs is acceptable to the society, then a change cannot be reasonably assessed as an improvement. It's just different. In fact, we cannot reasonably conclude that things are now better (or worse) than before. If the current culture approves, things are good now. And if the previous culture approved, then things were good then. There cannot be moral growth.



But it seems to us that we have come a long way, baby. And it also seems that there is room for growth. If these two intuitive beliefs are rational, then NCR cannot be true.

* These consequences were discussed more briefly in chapter 1 of this text, when we looked at the moral problems with relativism in general.

Finally, if NCR is true, then we can determine whether an action is morally right or morally wrong in a society simply by consulting public opinion in that society.

Remember, NCR has two prongs: that moral claims are meaningless outside a culture index, and that the moral rightness or wrongness of an act in any culture is determined wholly by traditions, customs, and beliefs in that culture. The first two consequences of NCR trace from the first prong, this final one traces from the second one.

If morality is wholly determined by beliefs, customs, and traditions in a culture, then to determine what's right and wrong, we can simply take a poll within a culture to learn about what's right or wrong. We can see this as a sort of "majority rules" concept. Thus, we should be able to determine what is right or wrong in the US by looking around us to get the majority view on the issue.

But is that in fact the way it works? The first thing I wonder about is the diversity of opinions around the US. For example, the majority of persons in, say, Omaha, believe that people should have the right to own guns. My not-at-all scientific investigation led me to the observation that Omahans want to keep their gun rack full, if they have one—and many do. And whether they personally have guns in the home, they believe that it is morally permissible to have a handgun, perhaps in the bedroom, as a safety in case of home intrusion.

In contrast, consider the people of Seattle, who disagree. The majority of people there believe that perhaps hunting guns are fine, but handguns are unnecessary. In fact, to have a gun in one's home—especially in the bedroom, not locked up, is immoral. Now if NCR is correct, than both Omahans and Seattleites are right. It is both moral and immoral to have a handgun by the bed. But this defies the Principle of Non-Contradiction.

Of course, one might say that it's right to have a gun by the bed in Omaha, and wrong to have one in Seattle, but this makes things difficult for national law and moral judgment. Omahans and Seattleites both justify their view by reference to the Bill of Rights. So the Bill of Rights both says guns are acceptable and says guns are not acceptable—again, defying the Principle of Non Contradiction.

We can be careful here by referencing the culture index. But then we'd have to say that there is no such thing as *good* or *bad*, no such thing as *morally acceptable* or *morally unacceptable*. Rather, there is *good-in-Omaha* and *good-in-Seattle*. There is *morally-acceptable-in-Omaha* but *morally-blameworthy-in-Seattle*. But it seems wrong to say that what is morally acceptable in Omaha is worthy of moral blame and censure only on the grounds of it happening in Seattle. Still, if NCR is correct, then we can't say the majority view of one city is right and the other is wrong.

Furthermore, we can't bring disputes to arbitration. By American law and custom, when there's a disputed situation, it is eventually brought to court for arbitration. Sometimes, we bring the law itself to arbitration to see whether the law itself or the custom itself is immoral, (with morality defined as something consistent with the US Constitution). The Supreme Court is supposed to look not at the majority view, but at a set of legal and moral principles that are held to be impartial and universal. We hold that the Constitution is a supreme standard for legality on the basis that there are some universally applicable standards of good and bad that can somehow be captured by law. But if NCR is true, then our notion of an impartial judge—even as an ideal—is nonsensical.

In fact, this gives us another insight into the problem of the last consequence we discussed. In the 1960s, the Supreme Court defied popular opinion and ruled that schools and businesses should be integrated, that blacks and whites were to be considered of equal value. If NCR is true, this action was immoral. The same can be said of the Loving ruling that racial intermarriage was morally acceptable. Even before that, the superior court ruling in Omaha that Native Americans were in fact humans, deserving human rights.* If the majority view is the standard of morality, then it was immoral to change the view of Native American or African American rights or mixed-race and same-sex marriage. Cultural Relativism obliterates the judiciary and the power of the minority voice in government.

* This is the 1879 case, *United States ex rel. Standing Bear v. Crook*, where Judge Elmer S. Dundy ruled that "an Indian is a person" within the meaning of *habeas corpus.* This landmark case changed the view of President Hayes regarding the rights of Native Americans.

But regardless our views of current issues facing the Court, it seems odd to hold that the majority view is always the measure of morality. Not only does NCR defy the PNC, but it also goes against the foundation of our own understanding of law.

None of these, of course, prove NCR to be false. But what they do give us are strong reasons to reconsider any inclination to endorse it. For if NCR is true, then the notion that justice should be impartial is unreasonable. If NCR is true, then radical moral change is impossible. And if NCR is true, any extra-cultural assessment of morality is meaningless. But we routinely endorse these three things, and do so *because* we believe they are reasonable.

Ultimately, if NCR is true, then ethics itself is meaningless, since ethics is the study of morality. Why study something that can be determined by taking a poll? But we have studied ethics for millennia. So either we have a very long and irrational tradition (which is certainly possible), or NCR is false.

NCR requires these things to be nonsensical. But they seem to make a lot of sense. Either we are mistaken about our legal and moral traditions, or NCR is mistaken. We can't have it both ways.

On the Other Hand…

The pull to endorse NCR and the truth of DCR does give us some useful insights, other than those just mentioned. First, we have seen that not all cultural practices are based on "absolute" morality. The Callatians and Greeks shared a deep value, even though their cultures expressed that value in different ways. Again, this is that distinction between *practices* and *principles*.

Second, we have seen that some cultural practices are based on prejudice. As such, they can be defective. Cultures make mistakes. And values can be changed.

Recognizing these two things gives us our final insight: DCR and the pull of NCR both give us reason to become more tolerant of those cultures whose practices are bewildering or offensive to us. There is a middle ground between intolerance and full endorsement. It is the place of good judgment, where we "look before we leap"—where we carefully analyze the principles beneath practices before jumping to a conclusion about those who engage in that practice. In fact, that's one important way we apply the rules of discourse—especially the rule that reminds us not to conclude more than the evidence allows.

All people are the same. It is only their habits that are different.

(Confucius)

A SECOND SUBJECTIVIST APPROACH: EMOTIVISM

We have seen, beyond any reasonable refutation, what's wrong with relativism. We've also see what good the intuition that drives relativism can offer. But the problem of relativism—other than the logical error—is broader than what might be assumed. The key assumption is that there cannot be any *objective* standard of morality. But Cultural Relativism isn't the only way one might go to refute attempts at objective ethics.

A second approach, here championed by English philosopher A.J. (Freddie) Ayer (our compatibilist friend from chapter 13), is called *emotivism*. In a nutshell, Ayer argues that statements about goodness, justice, beauty, and religion are not the same sort of things as statements about science and mathematics. Because these statements cannot be verified empirically (that is, scientifically, via one's senses), they cannot be truth evaluable. They aren't statements at all. They're something different—like exclamations or expressions of one's preferences. If this is the case, then we cannot derive an objective moral system from them. Thus, ethics is subjective.[*]

Look at Ayer's argument, and prepare a critical question over it. Can you reconstruct his argument and see what he's getting at? Focus especially on how his account differs from NCR, and how he establishes a moral standard. Ayer's is a very careful, logical text. Focus your CQ on the Verification Principle. Finally, take some careful notice on what ethical sentences are supposed to *do* when somebody utters them.

[*] Some philosophers hold that, strictly speaking, Emotivism is not a form of Subjectivism. If you hold that subjectivism is specifically the various forms of Relativism, then this is so. Whereas relativists will say that x is good or bad, understanding this to mean that, given a context, x is good or bad, Emotivists would try to convince their hearer to *change* behavior. They are certainly different (as we'll see).

However—as noted above—we are here using the term 'subjective' to reference the *kind of moral standard*, whether it is external to human experience or whether it is constituted from human feelings, beliefs, experiences, etc. As such, we are not talking about Subjectivism—we're not using any 'ism' with this term. Loosely speaking, we could use the term to refer to any subjectivist ethical system or standard. But keep in mind that careful philosophers make a distinction here. (Of course we do!)

CRITIQUE OF ETHICS

A.J. Ayer[*]

We begin by admitting that the fundamental ethical concepts are unanalysable, inasmuch as there is no criterion by which one can test the validity of the judgements in which they occur. So far we are in agreement with the absolutists. But, unlike the absolutists, we are able to give an explanation of this fact about ethical concepts. We say that the reason why they are unanalysable is that they are mere pseudo-concepts. The presence of an ethical symbol in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content. Thus if I say to someone, 'You acted wrongly in stealing that money,' I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, 'You stole that money.' In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said, 'You stole that money,' in a peculiar tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks. The tone, or the exclamation marks, adds nothing to the literal meaning of the sentence. It merely serves to show that the expression of it is attended by certain feelings in the speaker.

If now I generalize my previous statement and say, 'Stealing money is wrong.' I produce a sentence which has no factual meaning—that is, expresses no proposition which can be either true or false. It is as if I had written 'Stealing money!!' — where the shape and thickness of the exclamation marks show, by a suitable convention, that a special sort of moral disapproval is the feeling which is being expressed. It is clear that there is nothing said here which can be true or false. Another man may disagree with me about the wrongness of stealing, in the sense that he may not have the same feelings about stealing as I have, and he may quarrel with me on account of my moral sentiments. But he cannot, strictly speaking, contradict me. For in saying that a certain type of action is right or wrong, I am not making any factual statement, not even a statement about my own state of mind. I am merely expressing certain moral sentiments. And the man who is ostensibly contradicting me is merely expressing his moral sentiments. So that there is plainly no sense in asking which of us is in the right. For neither of us is asserting a genuine proposition.

What we have just been saying about the symbol 'wrong' applies to all normative ethical symbols. Sometimes they occur in sentences which record ordinary empirical facts besides expressing ethical feeling about those facts: sometimes they occur in sentences which simply express ethical feeling about a certain type of action, or situation,

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[*] From Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (chapter vi), 1946.

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without making any statement of fact. But in every case in which one would commonly be said to be making an ethical judgement, the function of the relevant ethical word is purely 'emotive'. It is used to express feeling about certain objects, but not to make any assertion about them.

It is worth mentioning that ethical terms do not serve only to express feeling. They are calculated also to arouse feeling, and so to stimulate action. Indeed some of them are used in such a way as to give the sentences in which they occur the effect of commands. Thus the sentence 'It is your duty to tell the truth' may be regarded both as the expression of a certain sort of ethical feeling about truthfulness and as the expression of the command 'Tell the truth.' The sentence 'You ought to tell the truth' also involves the command 'Tell the truth', but here the tone of the command is less emphatic. In the sentence 'It is good to tell the truth' the command has become little more than a suggestion. And thus the 'meaning" of the word 'good', in its ethical usage, is differentiated from that of the word 'duty' or the word 'ought'. In fact we may define the meaning of the various ethical words in terms both of the different feelings they are ordinarily taken to express, and also the different responses which they are calculated to provoke.

We can now sec why it is impossible to find a criterion for determining the validity of ethical judgements. It is not because they have an 'absolute' validity which is mysteriously independent of ordinary sense-experience, but because they have no objective validity whatsoever. If a sentence makes no statement at all, there is obviously no sense in asking whether what it says is true or false. And we have seen that sentences which simply express moral judgements do not say anything. They are pure expressions of feeling and as such do not come under the category of truth and falsehood. They are unverifiable for the same reason as a cry of pain or a word of command is unverifiable—because they do not express genuine propositions.

Thus, although our theory of ethics might fairly be said to be radically subjectivist, it differs in a very important respect from the orthodox subjectivist theory. For the orthodox subjectivist does not deny, as we do, that the sentences of a moralizer express genuine propositions. All he denies is that they express propositions of a unique nonempirical character. His own view is that they express propositions about the speaker's feelings. If this were so, ethical judgements clearly would be capable of being true or false. They would be true if the speaker had the relevant feelings, and false if he had not. And this is a matter which is, in principle, empirically verifiable. Furthermore they could be significantly contradicted. For if I say, 'Tolerance is a virtue,' and someone answers, 'You don't approve of it,' he would, on the ordinary

subjectivist theory, be contradicting me. On our theory, he would not be contradicting me. because, in saying that tolerance was a virtue, I should not be making any statement about my own feelings or about anything else. I should simply be evincing my feelings, which is not at all the same thing as saying that I have them.

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The distinction between the expression of feeling and the assertion of feeling is complicated by the fact that the assertion that one has a certain feeling often accompanies the expression of that feeling, and is then, indeed, a factor in the expression of that feeling. Thus I may simultaneously of the words 'I am bored' is one of the circumstances which make it true to say that I am expressing or evincing boredom. But I can express boredom without actually saying that I am bored. I can express it by my tone and gestures, while making a statement about something wholly unconnected with it, or by an ejaculation, or without uttering any words at all. So that even if the assertion that one has a certain feeling always involves the expression of that feeling, the expression of a feeling assuredly does not always involve the assertion that one has it. And this is the important point to grasp in considering the distinction between our theory and the ordinary subjectivist theory. For whereas the subjectivist holds that ethical statements actually assert the existence of certain feelings, we hold that ethical statements are expressions and excitants of feeling which do not necessarily involve any assertions.

We have already remarked that the main objection to the ordinary subjectivist theory is that the validity of ethical judgements is not determined by the nature of their author's feelings. And this is an objection which our theory escapes. For it does not imply that the existence of any feelings is a necessary and sufficient condition of the validity of an ethical judgement. It implies, on the contrary, that ethical judgements have no validity.

There is, however, a celebrated argument against subjectivist theories which our theory does not escape. It has been pointed out by Moore that if ethical statements were simply statements about the speaker's feelings, it would be impossible to argue about questions of value. To take a typical example: if a man said that thrift was a virtue, and another replied that it was a vice, they would not. on this theory, be disputing with one another. One would be saying that he approved of thrift, and the other that he didn't; and there is no reason why both these statements should not be true. Now Moore held it to be obvious that we do dispute about questions of value, and accordingly concluded that the particular form of subjectivism which he was discussing was false.

It is plain that the conclusion that it is impossible to dispute about questions of value follows from our theory also. For as we hold that

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such sentences as 'Thrift is a virtue' and 'Thrift is a vice' do not express propositions at all, we clearly cannot hold that they express incompatible propositions. We must therefore admit that if Moore's argument really refutes the ordinary subjectivist theory, it also refutes ours. But, in fact, we deny that it does refute even the ordinary subjectivist theory. For we hold that one really never does dispute about questions of value.

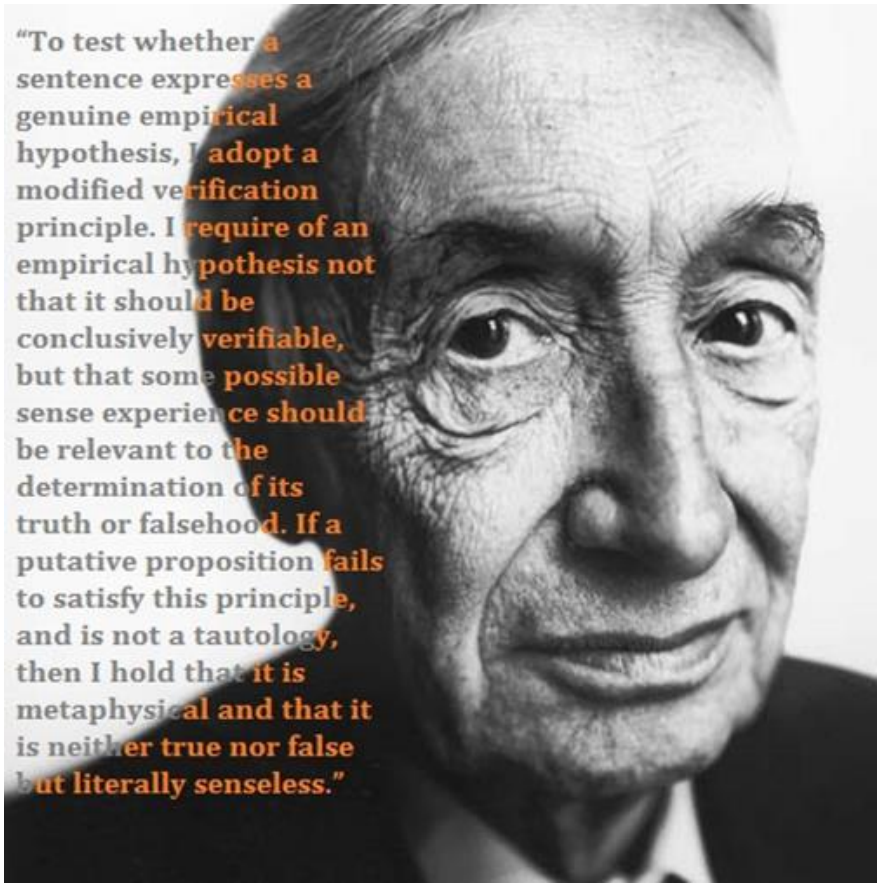
This may seem, at first sight, to be a very paradoxical assertion. For we certainly do engage in disputes which are ordinarily regarded as disputes about questions of value. But, in all such cases, we find, if we consider the matter closely, that the dispute is not really about a question of value, but about a question of fact. When someone disagrees with us about the moral value of a certain action or type of action, we do admittedly resort to argument in order to win him over to our way of thinking. But we do not attempt to show by our arguments that he has the 'wrong' ethical feeling towards a situation whose nature he has correctly apprehended. What we attempt to show is that he is mistaken about the facts of the case. We argue that he has misconceived the agent's motive: or that he has misjudged the effects of the action, or its probable effects in view of the agent's knowledge; or that he has failed to take into account the special circumstances in which the agent was placed. Or else we employ more general arguments about the effects which actions of a certain type tend to produce, or the qualities which are usually manifested in their performance. We do this in the hope that we have only to get our opponent to agree with us about the nature of the empirical facts for him to adopt the same moral attitude towards them as we do. And as the people with whom we argue have generally received the same moral education as ourselves, and live in the same social order, our expectation is usually justified. But if our opponent happens to have undergone a different process of moral 'conditioning' from ourselves, so that, even when he acknowledges all the facts, he still disagrees with us about the moral value of the actions under discussion, then we abandon the attempt to convince him by argument. We say that it is impossible to argue with him because he has a distorted or undeveloped moral sense; which signifies merely that he employs a different set of values from our own. We feel that our own system of values is superior, and therefore speak in such derogatory terms of his. But we cannot bring forward any arguments to show that our system is superior. For our judgement that it is so is itself a judgement of value, and accordingly outside the scope of argument. It is because argument fails us when we come to deal with pure questions of value, as distinct from questions of fact, that we finally resort to mere abuse.

In short, we find that argument is possible on moral questions only if some system of values is presupposed. If our opponent concurs with

us in expressing moral disapproval of all actions of a given type C, then we may get him to condemn a particular action A, by bringing forward arguments to show that A is of type t. For the question whether A does or does not belong to that type is a plain question of fact. Given that a man has certain moral principles, we argue that he must, in order to be consistent, react morally to certain things in a certain way. What we do not and cannot argue about is the validity of these moral principles. We merely praise or condemn them in the light of our own feelings.

If anyone doubts the accuracy of this account of moral disputes, let him try to construct even an imaginary argument on a question of value which does not reduce itself to an argument about a question of logic or about an empirical matter of fact. I am confident that he will not succeed in producing a single example. And if that is the case, be must allow that its involving the impossibility of purely ethical arguments is not, as Moore thought, a ground of objection to our theory, but rather a point in favour of it.

Having upheld our theory against the only criticism which appeared to threaten it, we may now use it to define the nature of all ethical inquiries. We find that ethical philosophy consists simply in saying that ethical concepts are pseudo-concepts and therefore unanalysable. The further task of describing the different feelings that



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the different ethical terms are used to express, and the different reactions that they customarily provoke, is a task for the psychologist. There cannot be such a thing as ethical science, if by ethical science one means the elaboration of a 'true' system of morals. For we have seen that, as ethical judgements are mere expressions of feeling, there can be no way of determining the validity of any ethical system, and, indeed, no sense in asking whether any such system is true. All that one may legitimately inquire in this connexion is, What are the moral habits of a given person or group of people, and what causes them to have precisely those habits and feelings? And this inquiry falls wholly within the scope of the existing social sciences.

It appears, then, that ethics, as a branch of knowledge, is nothing more than a department of psychology and sociology. And in case anyone thinks that we are overlooking the existence of casuistry, we may remark that casuistry is not a science, but is a purely analytical investigation of the structure of a given moral system. In other words, it is an exercise in formal logic.

When one comes to pursue the psychological inquiries which constitute ethical science, one is immediately enabled to account for the Kantian and hedonistic theories of morals. For one finds that one of the chief causes of moral behaviour is fear, both conscious and unconscious, of a god's displeasure, and fear of the enmity of society. And this, indeed, is the reason why moral precepts present themselves to some people as 'categorical' commands. And one finds, also, that the moral code of a society is partly determined by the beliefs of that society concerning the conditions of its own happiness—or, in other words, that a society tends to encourage or discourage a given type of conduct by the use of moral sanctions according as it appears to promote or detract from the contentment of the society as a whole. And this is the reason why altruism is recommended in most moral codes and egotism condemned. It is from the observation of this connexion between morality and happiness that hedonistic or eudaemonistic theories of morals ultimately spring, just as the moral theory of Kant is based on the fact, previously explained, that moral precepts have for some people the force of inexorable commands. As each of these theories ignores the fact which lies at the root of the other, both may be criticized as being one-sided; but this is not the main objection to either of them. Their essential defect is that they treat propositions which refer to the causes and attributes of our ethical feelings as if they were definitions of ethical concepts. And thus they fail to recognize that ethical concepts are pseudo-concepts and consequently indefinable.

As we have already said, our conclusions about the nature of ethics apply to aesthetics also. Aesthetic terms are used in exactly the same

way as ethical terms. Such aesthetic words as 'beautiful' and 'hideous' are employed, as ethical words are employed, not to make statements of fact, but simply to express certain feelings and evoke a certain response. It follows, as in ethics, that there is no sense in attributing objective validity to aesthetic judgements, and no possibility of arguing about questions of value in aesthetics, but only about questions of fact. A scientific treatment of aesthetics would show us what in general were the causes of aesthetic feeling, why various societies produced and admired the works of an they did, why taste varies as it does within a given society, and so forth. And these are ordinary psychological or sociological questions. They have, of course, little or nothing to do with aesthetic criticism as we understand it. But that is because the purpose of aesthetic criticism is not so much to give knowledge as to communicate emotion. The critic, by calling attention to certain features of the work under review, and expressing his own feelings about them, endeavours to make us share his attitude towards the work as a whole. The only relevant propositions that he formulates are propositions describing the nature of the work. And these are plain records of fact. We conclude, therefore, that there is nothing in aesthetics, any more than there is in ethics, to justify the view that it embodies a unique type of knowledge.

Ethical words are employed, not to make statements of fact, but simply to express certain feelings and evoke a certain response.

It should now be clear that the only information which we can legitimately derive from the study of our aesthetic and moral experiences is information about our own mental and physical make-up. We take note of these experiences as providing data for our psychological and sociological generalizations. And this is the only way in which they serve to increase our knowledge. It follows that any attempt to make our use of ethical and aesthetic concepts the basis of a metaphysical theory concerning the existence of a world of values, as distinct from the world of facts, involves a false analysis of these concepts. Our own analysis has shown that the phenomena of moral experience cannot fairly be used to support any rationalist or metaphysical doctrine whatsoever.

NOTES

REVIEWING & ANALYZING AYER'S ARGUMENT FOR EMOTIVISM

The theory that Ayer presents here has been called *emotivism.* So we can define the theory:

> **Emotivism**: *the philosophical thesis that ethical statements have no truth value and are thus only expressions of personal feeling that serve to arouse similar feelings in others.*

We need to step back into logic for a moment to see what Ayer means.

Recall that there are four different kinds of sentences:* statements, questions, commands, and exclamations. And recall that only the first kind carries truth value. We can't say that the sentence "what do you mean?" is true or false—nor can we say this about any other question. The same goes for sentences like "Knock it off!" or "What the heck?!" Neither commands nor exclamations carry truth.

Ayer's claim is that moral judgments all fall in the category that contains exclamations. And if this is true—if moral statements are exclamations or expressions of personal sentiment—then they have no truth value. And if they have no truth value, then they also don't carry the weight of obligation.

So how does Ayer come to this conclusion about ethics?

Analytic and Synthetic

There are two kinds of statements we can make.

> *X is an **analytic statement** iff the truth value of x is determined by the meaning of the terms in* x.
>
> *X is a **synthetic statement** iff the truth value of x is determined by the relationship of the meaning of the terms in x and the states of affairs in the world.*

An analytic statement then, will look like these:

1. X is a statement iff x is a sentence that carries a truth value.
2. All bachelors are unmarried men.
3. If something is mortal, then that something will someday die.

Whether any of these statements is true depends on the meaning of the terms. If 'bachelor' indeed *does* mean 'unmarried man,' then 2 is true. If 'mortal' does entail dying, then 3 is true. Analytic statements are true or false *by definition.*

On the other hand, synthetic statements look like these:

4. Cats are furry.
5. $E = MC^2$
6. God loves you.
7. Stealing money is wrong.

To determine whether cats are furry, we need to check out cats in the world. The truth of 4 isn't just based on the meaning of the words, but on the relationship of the sentence to the world. And in fact, there are cats who *aren't* furry, so since 4 offers a universal statement, it isn't true: Sphynx cats show this. Rather, we can modify 4 to say "most cats are furry."

The same goes for 5. The truth of relativity is dependent on whether it accurately explains how things work in the universe.

Ayer notes that 6 and 7 are also synthetic statements. Determining their truth requires more than just an assessment of the meaning of the terms in them.

But how do we determine the truth of a synthetic proposition?†

The school of thought to which Ayer belongs (Logical Positivism)‡ posits an important principle that establishes a truth criterion: **the *Verification Principle*** (VP).

> **VP**: *a synthetic proposition P has truth value only if P is empirically verifiable.*

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* Reference chapter 4 on claims and chapter 5 on the basic structure of arguments.

† Remember that 'proposition' is another way to say 'statement.' In fact, it is the term that is more often used by philosophers and logicians.

‡ The Logical Positivists held that all metaphysical statements were, ultimately, meaningless, since none were empirically verifiable. Instead, one would posit a conceptual framework as a hypothesis, and determine what was verifiably true given that hypothetical framework.

To empirically verify something is to test it by means of the senses, like in a scientific laboratory (or informally, by everyday experience). So if a statement cannot be tested this way—empirically—then that statement has no truth value. And if it has no truth value, then it is technically not a statement at all (but an exclamation or expressive utterance).

Of course, we need to recognize that an *actual* experimental test need not happen, just that it is in principle to perform such a test. After all, we don't need to determine whether something is in fact *true* to determine whether it has a *truth value*. It follows from this that the *only* kinds of claims (propositions) that merit analysis are those of science and linguistics—those of empirical or semantic analysis.

Let's consider statements 6 and 7 now. Given the VP, we would have to determine whether either is true by reference to our senses.

But how can we test 5? What scientific test can we use? It seems there is none. Thus, Ayer holds that statements of religion are not truth-evaluable.*

Now let's look at our final proposition:

7. Stealing money is wrong.

How can we test this by our senses? What empirical property does "wrong" have? None. So Ayer concludes that moral statements are not truth evaluable. Ayer concludes from this that moral judgments are "pure expressions of feeling."

Moral Judgments

But this seems odd, doesn't it? We certainly *think* we're making meaningful statements when uttering moral judgments. We certainly *think* we're saying something truth-evaluable when we utter something like 7. But Ayer suggests we should look closer. Let's look at a set of sentences closely related to 7.

8. You were wrong to steal that money.
9. You ought not to steal money.

Let's try to determine the truth of 8. We have embedded in it this claim:

8.1. You stole that money.

Well, that's certainly truth-evaluable. Either you did or didn't. But 8 says more than that. It adds the concept "wrong" to 8.1. But wrongness is not something that can be scientifically tested. So 8 says something more like this:

You stole that money. + "wrong"

Now we remember that statements, not words, are true or false.† Suppose it is true that you stole that money. Then we can assess 8 this way:

You stole that money. + "wrong"

↓ ↓

true nothing

But "wrong" isn't really *nothing*. In fact, when we say something is wrong, we are saying that we disapprove. So, on this assessment, a statement like 8 should be understood something like this:

You stole that money. *Boo!!*

Statements like 7 and 9 are even less meaningful, because, when tested by the VP, they're totally without truth value. Here's what we get from either one of them when we strip them down:

Stealing money *Boo!!*

Well, if the VP is the correct tool for measuring the meaningfulness of propositions, you can see why this theory is called *emotivism.* Moral judgments are just statements of our feelings. If this is the case, then moral judgments are not *assertions*, but *expressions*. As such, they have no truth value.

Illocutions & Perlocutions

But they're a special kind of expression. Ayer notes that moral judgments carry an emotive weight to them: they are intended "to arouse feelings in others and

* This is discussed in a part of the chapter not included in this reading selection.

† See chapter 3 of this textbook.

to stimulate action." Thus, they are *perlocutionary* statements.

> *A statement x is a* ***perlocution*** *iff the utterance of x has some intended action A, though x itself does not constitute or effect A.*

That sounds technical, but really, it isn't. To see how perlocutionary acts work, consider the holiday dinner table. Suppose you are sitting around the table, feasting with a number of friends and family members. Your mother, a paragon of manners, says,

"Can you reach the salt?"

Now what your mom is *actually* (directly) doing is asking whether you have a specific ability.

That *direct* utterance of your mom's is called the *illocution:*

> *A statement x is an* ***illocution*** *iff the utterance of x means exactly what the statement(s) constituting x mean.*

So uttering the words "can you reach the salt" has the illocution—the literal meaning—of a question: do you have the ability to reach the salt?

But the utterance also has another (indirect) meaning. *Through* the utterance of a question about your ability, your mom is intending you to understand a request that you *do* something—pass the salt to her.*

That's called the *perlocutionary force* of her utterance.

In the same way, Ayer notes, moral judgments both express our feelings and aim to effect some belief and/or action in those to whom we express our moral sentiments. So when we say "Stealing money is wrong" (7), we are doing three things:

(a) expressing a personal feeling (ew!) about stealing money,

(b) intending our hearer(s) to feel the same way I do about stealing money, and

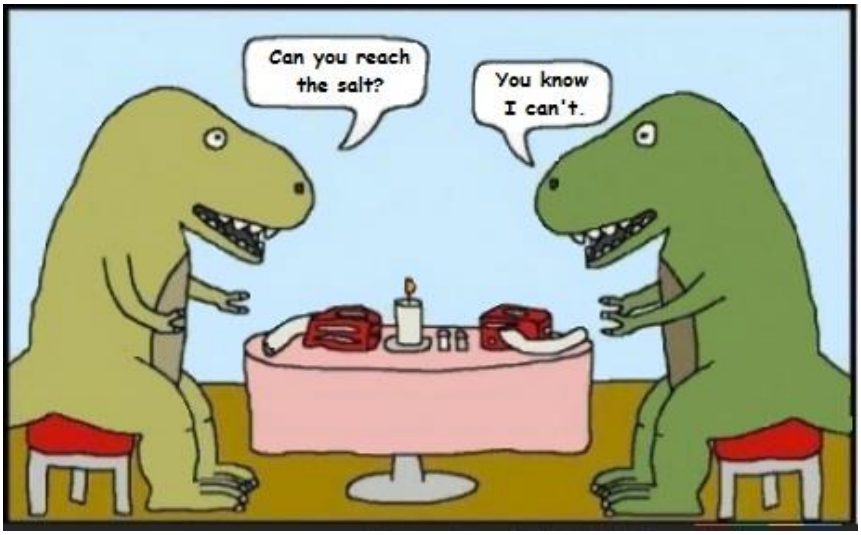
(c) intending, as a consequence of (b), that our hearer(s) act as I approve.

Notice that the direct action, when uttering 7, is (a), and (a) only. Because we indirectly also do (b) and (c), we are confused into thinking that our moral judgments have truth value. In short, when we say something like 7, we're doing two basic things: expressing our own feelings about the *uckiness* of stealing money, and intending others to feel and do as we feel and do about stealing money.

This brings us back to the definition of Emotivism, which we can now see has three parts:

Emotivism: *the philosophical thesis that*
(1) *ethical statements have no truth value*
(2) *and are thus only expressions of personal feeling*
(3) *that serve to arouse similar feelings in others.*

Notice how this is a *subjectivist* approach to ethics, but not at all a form a relativism. Cultural relativism holds that moral judgments *do* have a truth value, but that the truth value is wholly



* And if you're a snarky bugger like me, you'll probably ignore the perlocution and respond to the illocution, by reaching out and touching the salt shaker with your finger and replying, "why yes, yes I can." At which point, the paragon of manners will likely lose some of her high-mindedness and give you the frowning of a lifetime. True story.

determined by a culture index.* Normative Cultural Relativism (NCR) holds that moral judgments are meaningless *outside of a culture index*; but Emotivism holds that moral judgments are meaningless *period*.

Normative Subjectivist Relativism (NSR) claims that "Stealing money is wrong" is roughly identical to "I feel very negatively about stealing money." Thus, the statement has truth value (it either does or doesn't accurately describe one's psychological state.) DCR claims that "Stealing money is wrong" is roughly identical to "My culture disapproves of stealing money." Thus, the statement has truth value (again, it either does or does not accurately describe the values in that society).

But Emotivism says *neither* of these things. Emotivism says that "Stealing money is wrong" is nothing more than "Stealing money! Ew!" which has no truth value, no matter what the context is. Relativisms limit the scope of truth claims in moral judgments; Emotivism removes them altogether.

Snowball II demonstrates ethical reasoning

The Argument from the Verification Principle

So what argument do we have to justify Emotivism as a legitimate view of morality? Ayer provides us with the ***Argument from the Verification Principle*** (AVP):

AVP

1. If the truth or falsity of an apparent synthetic assertion cannot be experimentally verified (in principle), then the apparent assertion has no truth value.
2. Moral judgments appear to be synthetic assertions.
3. The truth or falsity of moral judgments cannot be experimentally verified (in principle).

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4. Moral judgments have no truth value.

The thinking behind AVP is understandable. And we can see that if all the premises are true, then the conclusion of AVP must be true; that is, the argument is valid. But is it sound?

To determine this, we need to demonstrate each of the premises to be true. Much has already been said and explained for the truth of 2 and 3. But what of premise 1, which is simply a statement of the Verification Principle (VP) itself? How can we prove this to be true?

We can go back to the simpler statement of the VP given above:

> **VP**: *a synthetic proposition P has truth value only if P is empirically verifiable.*

Is this something true *by definition* or is the VP itself a synthetic proposition? Looking carefully, we can see that the VP is *not* an analytic statement, so is synthetic. Thus, for it (like any other synthetic assertion) to carry truth value, it must be empirically verifiable. But how can we scientifically test the VP?

Uh…wait. We can't.

What now?

According to the VP, we should be able to empirically test the VP *itself* to verify its truth-bearing ability. And if the VP is *true*, then it turns out — embarrassingly, perhaps, that the VP itself has no truth value. And if it has no truth value at all, then it cannot be the kind of a sentence that belongs in an argument,† because it's just an expression. So if the VP is true, it can't be true because it can't carry truth. That is, the assumption that the VP is true forces

* And subjectivist relativism holds that there is a truth value to moral claims, but that it is constrained by a subject index.

† See chapters 3 and 4.

something like a contradiction: an incoherency.*

On the other hand, it's possible that the VP is *false*. This would enable synthetic statements like the VP to carry truth, but then the VP itself would just be false and the argument wouldn't even get off the ground. Either way, we have an unsound argument, since we cannot ever make premise 1 true.

Of course, we could try to modify 1 to make the AVP work, maybe by making it into something like this:

1*. If the truth or falsity of an apparent synthetic assertion [other than this one] cannot be experimentally verified (in principle), then the apparent assertion has no truth value.

But then once we make an exception for the VP, what stops us from making exceptions for other synthetic statements? Why not allow exceptions for moral or religious claims? What justifies the distinction?

Furthermore, there are certain mathematical statements that cannot be proven, but are synthetic. There is a large (and growing) list of mathematical conjectures that cannot (in principle) be proven. Are they thus meaningless? This seems unlikely. And there is another list of problems specific to logical or mathematical undecidability.† To make matters worse, there are uncountably many undecidable problems—regarding Turing machines, combinatorial group theory, analysis, matrices, and topology. But no mathematician or logician (Ayer included) will infer from undecidability that claims about such problems are meaningless or without truth value.

So do we make exceptions for the Verification Principle, and mathematics, but not ethics? Now the principle seems arbitrary and not at all reasonable.

The Argument from the Lack of Moral Disagreement

We might try to salvage Emotivism without reference to the VP. Such an argument could rely on empirical data, and might look like the ***Argument from the Lack of Moral Disagreement*** (LMD):

LMD

1. Although there might seem to be, there are in fact no real disputes about judgments of value.
2. The best explanation of the fact of no real disputes about judgments of value is that such judgments have no truth value.

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3. Judgments of value have no truth value.

The first thing to note here (following our order of analysis) is that the argument is ***not*** deductive. The premises don't guarantee the truth of the conclusion, which we can see from 2, which points to the *best explanation,* not the *only* explanation. This means that LMD is an *inductive* argument, offering a probability claim.

So is **LMD** a strong argument?

To determine this, we need to defend the premises. To see whether 1 is true, we would need to analyze every dispute that seems to be about value and

* Remember the four kinds of conclusions. Here is our first encounter with the fourth. If the VP is true, then the VP is meaningless, hence the whole inference is crazy talk nonsense.

The conclusion is *not* a contradiction because contradictions require *both truth and not-true* (p & ~p) whereas here we have truth and no-truth-value (not falsehood).

† An *undecidable* problem is a calculation that requires a 'yes' or 'no' answer, but where there is no computer or algorithm that can give such an answer, or give it with any predictable regularity. Another way to say this is that an undecidable problem is a problem whose language is not a recursive set (for you math geeks out there).

determine whether any are of this sort. If there are, then **LMD** fails.

Interestingly, the emotivist might point to the claims made by Rachels regarding the unjustified leap from DCR to NCR. Recall that Rachels argued that the disagreements are really over *practices,* not *principles*. Thus, the defender of **LMD** might say that this demonstrates that every apparent dispute over values is really only a dispute over the best way to demonstrate the value. But it isn't enough to demonstrate that *many* or *most* disputes are not really over values. To defend **LMD**, one would have to demonstrate *none* of them are.

After doing this, one would have to demonstrate the truth of 2. To do this, every reasonable explanation for the lack of disputes over value judgments would need to be assessed, and Emotivism would have to be shown as the very best one. If any other theory—say, psychological egoism or descriptive cultural relativism or Haidt's Moral Matrix—better accounts for the lack of disputes (if in fact there are none), then premise 2 is proven false. If either 1 or 2 is disproved (or rendered more unlikely than not), then **LMD** is shown to be a weak argument.

NO MORAL SYSTEM CAN REST SOLELY ON AUTHORITY.

(A.J. AYER)

TEAM PROJECT: BUILDING A VALID REFUTATION

AYER'S CASE FOR EMOTIVISM

The previous analysis looks at Ayer's emotivism, explaining his arguments for it, and analyzing whether they work. What it *doesn't* do is present a clear and direct argument *against* emotivism. That's where you come in.

Get together with a team of other students, and build a valid deductive argument with the conclusion "Emotivism is false." You have in this discussion evidence that the Verification Principle (VP) is without truth value. So how can you move from *no* truth value (regarding the VP) to *false* (regarding the theory itself)?

I suggest you have a statement of the VP as your first premise. Then, move from that claim with what you know to the required conclusion.

Once you have a valid argument, test it. What reasons do you have to think it's sound? On a day your instructor assigns, present your findings to other teams in the class, and be sure to explain the reasons you have for defending your premises. Invite other teams to "play devil's advocate," in order to test your argument.

You will need to turn in your team's argument that concludes "Emotivism is false" *in standard form*. Make sure every team member agrees on the argument and its presentation. Your instructor will set the due date for this project. Write that date on the assignment, along with the names of all your participating team members. Turn in *one* paper for the whole team. Please write legibly.

A THIRD SUBJECTIVIST VIEW: EGOISM

This third section looks to another way people attempt to defend a subjective approach to ethics. Recall that

> *An ethical theory T is **subjective** iff the standard of morality in T is considered dependent on the perspective of an individual person or group of people, and cannot be evaluated by anyone other than that individual person or group of people.*

We can see that relativism—including cultural relativism—is a subjectivist view. But it's not the only way to be subjective, as we saw when discussing emotivism. We found that the latter presented a logical case that ultimately failed its own test. But is it possible to present a subjectivism that seems to be objectively reasonable?

This last subjectivist approach we'll look at is that of Ayn Rand. It is interesting that she calls her theory "Objectivism," given that it is an approach that meets the standard definition of being subjective. Don't let her terminology confuse you, though. We will see that her approach is a form of ***egoism***. In fact, it's called ***ethical egoism***.

One might say that the "universal" moral standard for cultural relativism is that "each culture defines its own moral standards." The "universal" moral standard for emotivism is that "each person determines what is right or wrong based on emotional preference or distaste." Thus, one might say that the "universal" moral standard for ethical egoism is that *each person defines his or her own moral standards, based solely on what one thinks is to one's own best interests*. That is, if it promotes your goals and your own well-being, then it's moral. If it requires you to sacrifice yourself for another, then it's immoral. Rand calls this the ***virtue of selfishness***. And that's the title of the article you're now going to read. Don't forget to write a critical question on this reading, too. Focus on her argument, try to find her standard. How does her theory work?[i]

OTHER PEOPLE DO NOT EXIST FOR HIM, AND HE DOES NOT SEE WHY THEY SHOULD. OTHER PEOPLE HAVE NO RIGHT, NO HOLD, NO INTEREST OR INFLUENCE ON HIM. […HE HAS] NO REGARD WHATSOEVER FOR ALL THAT SOCIETY HOLDS SACRED, AND WITH A CONSCIOUSNESS ALL HIS OWN. HE HAS THE TRUE, INNATE PSYCHOLOGY OF A SUPERMAN. HE CAN NEVER REALIZE AND FEEL 'OTHER PEOPLE.'

(AYN RAND)

THE VIRTUE OF SELFISHNESS:

a new concept of egoism

Ayn Rand.*

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?

Is the concept of *value*, of "good or evil" an arbitrary human invention, unrelated to, underived from and unsupported by any facts of reality—or is it based on a *metaphysical* fact, on an unalterable condition of man's existence? (I use the word "metaphysical" to mean: that which pertains to reality, to the nature of things, to existence.) Does an arbitrary human convention, a mere custom, decree that man must guide his actions by a set of principles—or is there a fact of reality that demands it? Is ethics the province of *whims*: of personal emotions, social edicts and mystic revelations—or is it the province of *reason*? Is ethics a subjective luxury—or an *objective* necessity?

[...] To make this point fully clear, try 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 would not be able to have any values; it would have nothing to gain or to lose; it could not regard anything as *for* or *against* it, as serving or threatening its welfare, as fulfilling or frustrating its interests. It could have no interests and no goals.

Only a *living* entity can have goals or can originate them. And it is only a living organism that has the capacity for self-generated, goal-directed action. On the *physical* level, the functions of all living organisms, from the simplest to the most complex—from the nutritive function in the single cell of an amoeba to the blood circulation in the body of a man—are actions generated by the organism itself and directed to a single goal: the maintenance of the organism's *life*.†

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* Paper delivered at the University of Wisconsin Symposium on "Ethics in Our Time" in Madison, Wisconsin, on February 9, 1961. This paper has been abridged in order to focus on the relevant aspects of the ethical theory.

† 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. [Rand's note]

An organism's life depends on two factors: the material or fuel which it needs from the outside, from its physical background, and the action of its own body, the action of using that fuel *properly*. What standard determines what is *proper* in this context? The standard is the organism's life, or: that which is required for the organism's survival.

No choice is open to an organism in this issue: that which is required for its survival is determined by its *nature*, by the kind of entity it *is*. […] Life can be kept in existence only by a constant process of self-sustaining action. The goal of that action, the ultimate *value* which, to be kept, must be gained through its every moment, is the organism's *life*.

An *ultimate* value is that final goal or end to which all lesser goals are the means—and it sets the standard by which all lesser goals are *evaluated*. An organism's life is its *standard of value*: that which furthers its life is the *good*, that which threatens it is the *evil*.

Without an ultimate goal or end, there can be no lesser goals or means: a series of means going off into an infinite progression toward 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.

[…] 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*."

Now in what manner does a human being discover the concept of "*value*"? By what means does he first become aware of the issue of "*good or evil*" in its simplest form? By means of the physical sensations of *pleasure* or *pain*. Just as sensations are the first step of the development of a human consciousness in the realm of *cognition*, so they are its first step in the realm of *evaluation*.

The capacity to experience pleasure or pain is innate in a man's body; it is part of his *nature*, part of the kind of entity he *is*. He has no choice about it, and he has no choice about the standard that determines what will make him experience the physical sensation of pleasure or of pain. What is that standard? *His life*.

The pleasure-pain mechanism in the body of man—and in the bodies of all the living organisms that possess the faculty of consciousness—serves as an automatic guardian of the organism's life. The physical sensation of pleasure is a signal indicating that the organism is pursuing the *right* course of action. The physical sensation of pain is a warning signal of danger, indicating that the organism is pursuing the *wrong* course of action, that something is impairing the proper function of its body, which requires action to correct it. The best illustration of this can be seen in the rare, freak cases of children who are born without the capacity to experience physical pain; such children do not survive for long; they have no means of discovering what can injure them, no warning signals, and thus a minor cut can develop into a deadly infection, or a major illness can

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remain undetected until it is too late to fight it. Consciousness—for those living organisms which possess it—is the basic means of survival. […]

A plant has no choice of action; the goals it pursues are automatic and innate, determined by its nature. […] But whatever the conditions, there is no alternative in a plant's function: it acts automatically to further its life, it cannot act for its own destruction.

The range of actions required for the survival of the higher organisms is wider: it is proportionate to the range of their *consciousness*. The lower of the conscious species possess only the faculty of *sensation*, which is sufficient to direct their actions and provide for their needs. […]

The higher organisms possess a much more potent form of consciousness: they possess the faculty of *retaining* sensations, which is the faculty of *perception*. […] An animal […] is able to learn certain skills to deal with specific situations, such as hunting or hiding, which the parents of the higher animals teach their young. But 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. […]

Man has no automatic code of survival. He has no automatic course of action, no automatic set of values. His senses do not tell him automatically what is good for him or evil, what will benefit his life or endanger it, what goals he should pursue and what means will achieve them, what *values* his life depends on, what course of action it requires. His own consciousness has to discover the answers to all these questions—but his consciousness will not function *automatically*. […]

Just as the automatic values directing the functions of a plant's body are sufficient for its survival, but are not sufficient for an animal's—so the automatic values provided by the sensory-perceptual mechanism of its consciousness are sufficient to guide an animal, but are not sufficient for man. Man's actions and survival require the guidance of *conceptual* values derived from *conceptual* knowledge. But *conceptual* knowledge cannot be acquired *automatically*. […]

Reason is the faculty that identifies and integrates the material provided by man's senses. It is a faculty that man has to exercise *by choice*. […] [A] process of thought is not automatic nor "instinctive" nor involuntary—nor *infallible*. Man has to initiate it, to sustain it and to bear responsibility for its results. He has to discover how to tell what is true or false and how to correct his own errors; he has to discover how to validate his concepts, his conclusions, his knowledge; he has to discover the rules of thought, *the laws of logic*, to direct his thinking. Nature gives him no automatic guarantee of the efficacy of his mental effort.

[…] A being who does not know automatically what is true or false, cannot know automatically what is right or wrong, what is good for him or evil.

Yet he needs that knowledge in order to live. […] That which his survival requires is set by his nature and is not open to his choice. What *is* open to his choice is only whether he will discover it or not, whether he will choose the right goals and *values* or not. He is free to make the wrong choice, but not free to succeed with it. He is free to evade reality, he is free to unfocus his mind and stumble blindly down any road he pleases, but not free to avoid the abyss he refuses to see. Knowledge, for any conscious organism, is the means of survival; to a living consciousness, every "*is*" implies an "*ought*." Man is free to choose not to be conscious, but not free to escape the penalty of unconsciousness: destruction. Man is the only living species that has the power to act as his own destroyer—and that is the way he has acted through most of his history.

What, then, are the right goals for man to pursue? What are the values his survival requires? That is the question to be answered by the science of *ethics*. […] Ethics is *not* a mystic fantasy—nor a social convention—nor a dispensable, subjective luxury, to be switched or discarded in any emergency. Ethics is an *objective, metaphysical necessity of man's survival*—not by the grace of the supernatural nor of your neighbors nor of your whims, but by the grace of reality and the nature of life.

[…] Since reason is man's basic means of survival, that which is proper to the life of a rational being is the good; that which negates, opposes or destroys it is the evil.

Since everything man needs has to be discovered by his own mind and produced by his own effort, the two essentials of the method of survival proper to a rational being are: thinking and productive work.

If some men do not choose to think, but survive by imitating and repeating, like trained animals, the routine of sounds and motions they learned from others, never making an effort to understand their own work, it still remains true that their survival is made possible only by those who did choose to think and to discover the motions they are repeating. The survival of such mental parasites depends on blind chance; their unfocused minds are unable to know *whom* to imitate, *whose* motions it is safe to follow. *They* are the men who march into the abyss, trailing after any destroyer who promises them to assume the responsibility they evade: the responsibility of being conscious.

If some men attempt to survive by means of brute force or fraud, by looting, robbing, cheating or enslaving the men who produce, it still remains true that their survival is made possible only by their victims, only by the men who choose to think and to produce the goods which they, the looters, are seizing. Such looters are parasites incapable of survival, who exist by destroying those who *are* capable, those who are pursuing a course of action proper to man.

The men who attempt to survive, not by means of reason, but by means of force, are attempting to survive by the method of animals. But just as animals would not be able to survive by attempting the method of plants,

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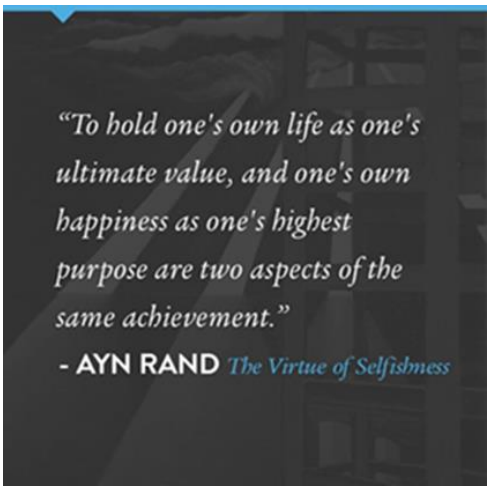
by rejecting locomotion and waiting for the soil to feed them—so men cannot survive by attempting the method of animals, by rejecting reason and counting on productive *men* to serve as their prey. Such looters may achieve their goals for the range of a moment, at the price of destruction: the destruction of their victims and their own. As evidence, I offer you any criminal or any dictatorship.



Man cannot survive, like an animal, by acting on the range of the moment. An animal's life consists of a series of separate cycles, repeated over and over again, such as the cycle of breeding its young, or of storing food for the winter; an animal's consciousness cannot integrate its entire lifespan; it can carry just so far, then the animal has to begin the cycle all over again, with no connection to the past. *Man's* life is a continuous whole: for good or evil, every day, year and decade of his life holds the sum of all the days behind him. He can alter his choices, he is free to change the direction of his course, he is even free, in many cases, to atone for the consequences of his past—but he is not free to escape them, nor to live his life with impunity on the range of the moment, like an animal, a playboy or a thug. If he is to succeed at the task of survival, if his actions are not to be aimed at his own destruction, man has to choose his course, his goals, his values in the context and terms of a lifetime. No sensations, percepts, urges or "instincts" can do it; only a mind can.

Such is the meaning of the definition: that which is required for man's survival *qua* man. [...] "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.

Man cannot survive as anything but man. He *can* abandon his means of survival, his mind, he *can* turn himself into a subhuman creature and he *can* turn his life into a brief span of agony—just as his body can exist for a while in the process of disintegration by disease. But he *cannot* succeed, as a subhuman, in achieving anything but the subhuman—as the ugly horror of the antirational periods of mankind's history can demonstrate. Man has to be man by choice—and it is the task of ethics to teach him how to live like man.

The Objectivist ethics holds man's life as the *standard* of value—and *his own life* as the ethical *purpose* of every individual man.

[…] Man must choose his actions, values and goals by the standard of that which is proper to man—in order to achieve, maintain, fulfill and enjoy that ultimate value, that end in itself, which is his own life.

Value is that which one acts to gain and/or keep—*virtue* is the act by which one gains and/or keeps it.

[...] 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.

Existentially, the activity of pursuing rational goals is the activity of maintaining one's life; psychologically, its result, reward and concomitant is an emotional state of happiness. 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 makes one think: "*This* is worth living for"—what one is greeting and affirming in emotional terms is the metaphysical fact that *life* is an end in itself.

[…] If you achieve that which is the good by a rational standard of value, it will necessarily make you happy; but that which makes you happy, by some undefined emotional standard, is not necessarily the good. […] The *moral cannibalism* of all hedonist and altruist doctrines lies in the premise that the happiness of one man necessitates the injury of another.

Today, most people hold this premise as an absolute not to be questioned. And when one speaks of man's right to exist for his own sake, for his own rational self-interest, most people assume automatically that this means his right to sacrifice others. Such an assumption is a confession of their own belief that to injure, enslave, rob or murder others is in man's self-interest—which he must selflessly renounce. The idea that man's self-interest can be served only by a non-sacrificial relationship with others has never occurred to those humanitarian apostles of unselfishness, who proclaim their desire to achieve the brotherhood of men. And it will not occur to them, or to anyone, so long as the concept "rational" is omitted from the context of "values," "desires," "self-interest" and *ethics*.

The Objectivist ethics proudly advocates and upholds *rational selfishness*—which means: the values required for man's survival *qua* man—which means: the values required for *human* survival—not the values produced by the desires, the emotions, the "aspirations," the feelings, the whims or the needs of irrational brutes, who have never outgrown the primordial practice of human sacrifices, have never discovered an industrial society and can conceive of no self-interest but that of grabbing the loot of the moment.

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The Objectivist ethics holds that *human* good does not require human sacrifices and cannot be achieved by the sacrifice of anyone to anyone. It holds that the *rational* interests of men do not clash—that there is no conflict of interests among men who do not desire the unearned, who do not make sacrifices nor accept them, who deal with one another as *traders*, giving value for value.

The principle of *trade* is the only rational ethical principle for all human relationships, personal and social, private and public, spiritual and material. It is the principle of *justice*.

A trader is a man who earns what he gets and does not give or take the undeserved. He does not treat men as masters or slaves, but as independent equals. He deals with men by means of a free, voluntary, unforced, uncoerced exchange—an exchange which benefits both parties by their own independent judgment. A trader does not expect to be paid for his defaults, only for his achievements. He does not switch to others the burden of his failures, and he does not mortgage his life into bondage to the failures of others.

In spiritual issues—(by "spiritual" I mean: "pertaining to man's consciousness")—the currency or medium of exchange is different, but the principle is the same. Love, friendship, respect, admiration are the emotional response of one man to the virtues of another, the spiritual *payment* given in exchange for the personal, selfish pleasure which one man derives from the virtues of another man's character. Only a brute or an altruist would claim that the appreciation of another person's virtues is an act of selflessness, that as far as one's own selfish interest and pleasure are concerned, it makes no difference whether one deals with a genius or a fool, whether one meets a hero or a thug, whether one marries an ideal woman or a slut. In spiritual issues, a trader is a man who does not seek to be loved for his weaknesses or flaws, only for his virtues, and who does not grant his love to the weaknesses or the flaws of others, only to their virtues.

To love is to value. Only a rationally selfish man, a man of *self-esteem*, is capable of love—because he is the only man capable of holding firm, consistent, uncompromising, unbetrayed values. The man who does not value himself, cannot value anything or anyone.

It is only on the basis of rational selfishness—on the basis of justice—that men can be fit to live together in a free, peaceful, prosperous, benevolent, *rational* society.

Can man derive any personal benefit from living in a human society? Yes—if it is a *human* society. The two great values to be gained from social existence are: knowledge and trade. Man is the only species that can transmit and expand his store of knowledge from generation to generation; the knowledge potentially available to man is greater than any one man could begin to acquire in his own life-span; every man gains an incalculable benefit from the knowledge discovered by others. The second great benefit is the division of labor: it enables a man to devote his effort to a particular field of work and to trade with others who specialize in other fields. This form of cooperation allows all men who take part in it to achieve a greater knowledge, skill and productive return on their effort than they could achieve if each had to produce everything he needs, on a desert island or on a self-sustaining farm.

But these very benefits indicate, delimit and define what kind of men can be of value to one another and in what kind of society: only rational, productive, independent men in a rational, productive, free society. Parasites, moochers, looters, brutes and thugs can be of no value to a human being—nor can he gain any benefit from living in a society geared to *their* needs, demands and protection, a society that treats him as a sacrificial animal and penalizes him for his virtues in order to reward *them* for their vices, which means: a society based on the ethics of altruism. No society can be of value to man's life if the price is the surrender of his right to his life.

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TWO KINDS OF EGOISM

The very first thing we want to make certain of, when discussing egoism, is that we don't confuse it with *egotism*. Whereas ***egoism*** is a theory about how one does or should behave, ***egotism*** (with a T) is a tendency of a person to behave or speak with an inflated sense of self-importance, to write or speak of oneself excessively. It is certainly possible that an egoist is also an egotist, but it's not necessary, so let's not mix the concepts (or terms) up as we proceed.

Psychological Egoism

Before we get into Ayn Rand's discussion on egoism—what she confusingly calls Objectivism—we want to make some things clear. And to do this, we'll begin with Joel Feinberg's discussion on two different kinds of egoism.[*] Just like we needed to distinguish between a *descriptive* understanding of relativism and a *normative* understanding of relativism, we'll need to distinguish between descriptive and normative theories of egoism. This gives us our first theory, ***Psychological Egoism*** (PE):

PE: *a theory according to which the* ***only thing anyone is capable of***

[*] In his 1958 paper called "Psychological Egoism."

desiring or pursuing as an ultimate end is one's own self-interest.

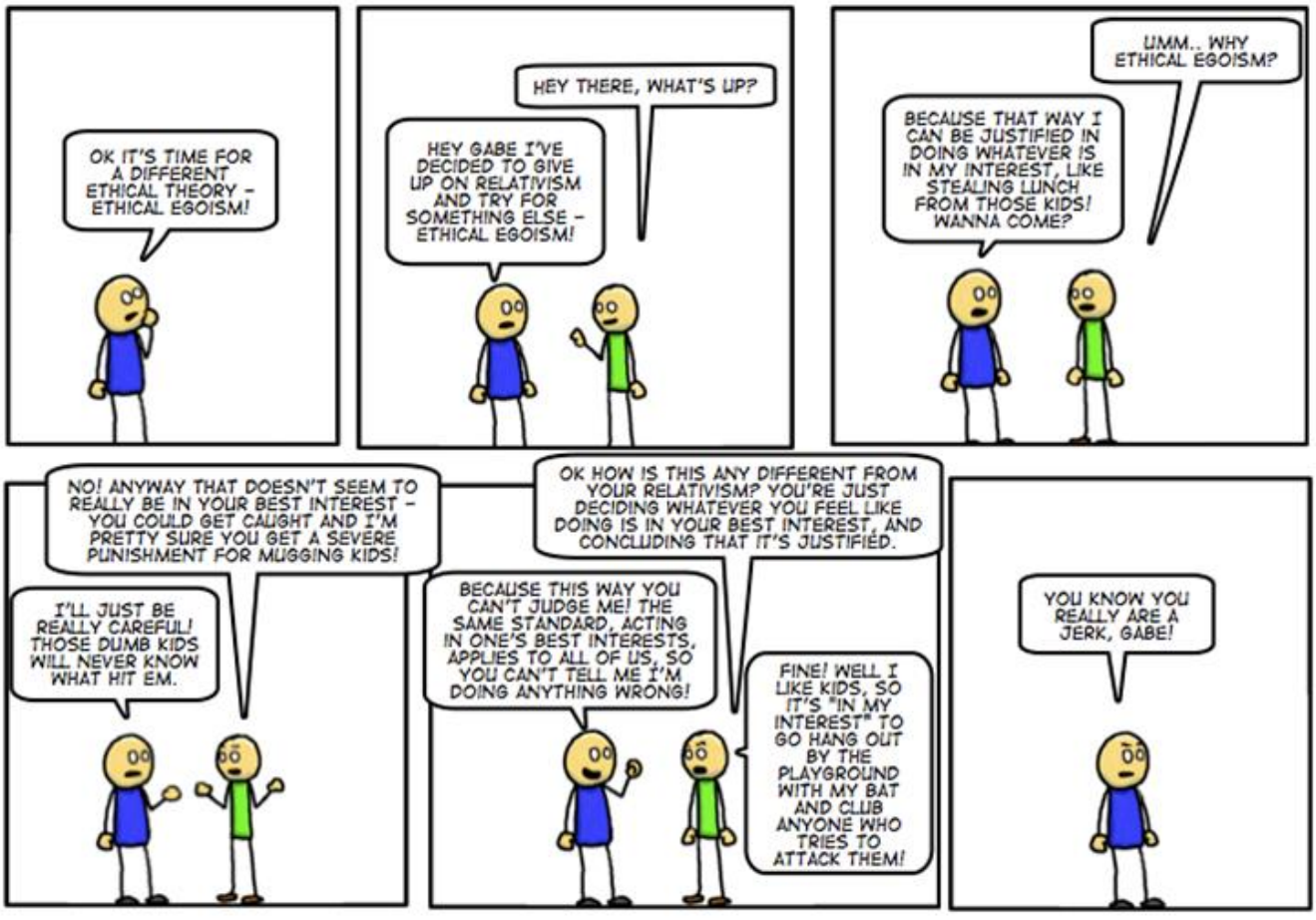
Like Descriptive Cultural Relativism only describes societal behavior and makes no normative claims, PE makes only descriptive claims. It does not say anything at all about whether it is obligatory, praiseworthy, or otherwise morally measureable that people act in an egoistic manner. PE does not claim anything about what *ought* to be the case, only about what *is* the case.

A second important factor of PE is that it is not saying that people *just happen* to act egoistically, but that *nobody can possibly act otherwise* than egoistically.* PE says that it is *impossible* for people to act in a way that is against one's own self-interest. As such, the claims of Psychological Egoism are very strong, indeed!

In contrast with PE's descriptive account, we have the normative account, called ***Ethical Egoism*** (EE):

EE: *a theory according to which the only thing anyone* ***ought*** *to pursue is one's own self-interest.*

How do we move from the *is* of PE to the *ought* of EE? Rand declares—rather hurriedly—that this is a non-issue. She writes that the simple fact of something's existence determines the correct behavior. That *is* determines *ought* with no need for anything else. But this is a non-answer, concluding something stronger than the evidence allows. More carefully, we can agree with Rand that the capacities and needs of entities have something to do with the functioning of that entity to ensure its survival. But survival is not identical with moral obligation. It is simple enough for one to look at survival and moral obligation through the lens of Leibniz's Law to see the difference.



* That is, it is impossible-in-α that anyone can act otherwise. See chapter 11 for a refresher on how to understand possibility and impossibility. Psychological Egoism says that in this world, it is impossible for people to have an ultimate motivation other than self-interest.

Before we go into Rand's discussion regarding the distinctly human *thinking* function, let's return to the relationship between psychological and ethical egoism. Can we move from PE to EE comfortably? Does the description ensure the obligation?

Why Believe Psychological Egoism is true?

Psychological egoism is a commonly held theory among both unreflective persons-on-the-street and more academically-minded persons like political economists (like Rand), politicians, and even some philosophers. Although most people unreflectively hold that PE is true, Feinberg traces their thinking to its logical underpinnings and presents four basic arguments in defense of PE. We're going to look at each one.

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The Argument from the Nature of Action

The first argument we'll call the **Argument from the Nature of Action** (ANA). Feinberg presents it thus:

> *Every action of mine is prompted by motives or desires or impulses which are my motives and not somebody else's. This fact might be expressed by saying that whenever I act I am always pursuing my own ends or trying to satisfy my own desires. And from this we might pass on to— 'I am always pursuing something for myself or seeking my own satisfaction.' Here is what seems like a proper description of a man acting selfishly, and if the description applies to all actions of all men, then it follows that all men in all their actions are selfish.*

Let's put that into standard form:

ANA

1. Every voluntary action is prompted by a motive of the agent's own.
2. Every voluntary action is the pursuit of the agent's own satisfaction.
3. Pursuit of one's own satisfaction is selfish.

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4. Every voluntary action is selfish.

On the surface, ANA looks valid. But is it? Consider what is being claimed in premise 1 versus what is being claimed in premise 2. To say that a voluntary action is *prompted* by a certain motive is to look at the *location* of the motive. That is, the motive is located in the agent somehow, that it is *me* that causes the action. But to say that a voluntary action is *aimed* at some outcome is to look at the *content* of the motive. Notice that the reasoning holds that 1 *entails* 2, that premise 1 means the same thing as or logically leads to 2. But this is just not the case.

Consider the brute logic in a different situation. Say I know that someone I'll call Joe does something x. I know *who* did x. Joe did x. The source of the action is Joe. But does my knowing the *source* tell me anything about Joe's motivation? I know *that* Joe did x, but this isn't sufficient for me to know *why* Joe did x. In the same way, simply knowledge that *the agent* is the source of my action is inadequate for any knowledge claim regarding the content of that agent's motive. We know *where* the motivation originates, but we have no evidence that tells us the content of the motivation. But ANA tells us that 1 means the same thing as 2. And that's just not true.

Now *if* we know that 1 guarantees 2, then the rest of the argument seems to follow. If it is true that a self-satisfaction motive is selfish (per 3) and that every voluntary action is motivated for self-satisfaction (per 1), then we could conclude the PE is true. But we have no evidence other than 1. We know that voluntary actions, by definition, are self-caused, that if an action is voluntary, then the agent is the cause of that action.

Psychological Egoistic Hedonism and the Argument from Pleasure

Furthermore, we have no way of testing to see whether 2 is even true. It seems clear that *some* of our actions are aimed at our own satisfaction, but *all* of them? How could one justify that? Feinberg presents a second argument that people use to make this case. We'll call it the ***Argument from Pleasure*** (AFP). This argument points to a specific form of psychological egoism called ***Psychological Egoistic Hedonism***, or PEH. To understand

how the AFP works, we should first understand PEH:

PEH: *the theory according to which the only thing anyone is capable of desiring or pursuing as an ultimate end is one's own* ***pleasure***.

PEH holds that the self-interest one invariably seeks, that the motivation of everyone's every single voluntary action is some sort of pleasure. It is this understanding of psychological egoism that motivates the attempt to demonstrate that premise 2 (of ANA) is true. Here's Feinberg's presentation of that reasoning:

> *It is a truism that when a person get what he wants he characteristically feels pleasure. This has suggested to many people that what we really want in every case is our own pleasure, and that we pursue other things only as a means.*

Here's the argument for PEH in standard form. Recall that *if this works*, it might give us that missing connection between the source of a motive and the content of a motive.

AFP

1. When someone gets what one wants, one characteristically feels pleasure.
2. What one really wants in any voluntary action is one's own pleasure.
3. If what one really wants in any action is one's own pleasure, then that action is selfish.

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4. So every voluntary action is selfish.

So does this work? One way to test this is to look for a ***counterexample***. Recall that this is a case where there's an instance where the opposite of what is claimed is true. Is it possible that we can act without wanting our own pleasure? Feinberg uses the (perhaps apocryphal) story of Lincoln and the pigs to challenge AFP.

The story goes like this. President Lincoln was supposedly himself a hedonistic egoist, as illustrated by the time he was travelling in a coach with a bunch of other travellers. It happened that they were passing over a corduroy bridge,[*] underneath which some piglets had gotten stuck in the slough and were at risk of drowning. The mama sow was making a terrible noise, helpless and apparently distraught at the plight of her brood. Lincoln asked the driver to halt the coach, and he himself got out and rescued the piglets. As he returned to his seat, a fellow passenger asked him how selfishness could justify this most recent, seemingly-altruistic action. The story goes that Lincoln replied that his action was the "very essence" of selfishness, since he would not have had a moment's peace of mind had he allowed the journey to continue without the stop, because he'd have been worrying over the family of pigs.

Case closed, right? You know we're not going down that easily. We have to ask *why* Lincoln, in this story, would have felt bad had he not acted. Let's tweak the story a bit, and suppose that before Lincoln was able to halt the carriage, and while he and the other passengers were all looking at the plight of the piggies, a hand from heaven reached down and parted the muddy waters, permitting the animals to scramble to safety. Certainly Lincoln would have felt a similar relief. Now that we've removed Lincoln from the position of taking any action, we can look at the pleasure itself.

Is there any difference between the basic pleasure of experiencing divine intervention and the basic pleasure of personally intervening? Is there anything different between the sensations one experiences when watching something perceived to be good happen and the sensations one experiences when personally making something perceived to be good happen? From the perspective of PEH, the answer has to be no. Pleasure is pleasure.

But this doesn't seem right. *Why* is it pleasurable to see the suffering of animals removed? What's the difference between, say, the pleasure of a good stretch when you

[*] A log bridge, where the logs run crosswise so that the ride across is bumpy like the ridges of corduroy.

first wake up and the pleasure of getting a huge raise? Or the difference between the pleasure of finishing a fantastically delicious meal and the pleasure of watching your firstborn child take those first, wavering steps? Or the difference between the pleasure of orgasm and the pleasure of accomplishing that goal that seemed once to be beyond reach? If we think carefully, it isn't the case, despite what PEH intends, that all pleasures are the same.

Some things are pleasurable *only because we value other things*. Some types of pleasure are only pleasurable as a means to a different end. Think about Lincoln. Unless he already cared about the welfare of animals, he wouldn't find any pleasure in the removal of their suffering. He had to already empathize with the plight of other creatures to find pleasure in their well-being. Furthermore, consider again the difference between divine intervention and personal action. There is something that drives us to act, to feel good, perhaps, when somebody else intervenes, but to feel remorse that it wasn't *I* who intervened.

Let me give a personal example. Many years ago, I was living in a mansion that had been converted into a number of apartments. There was this huge scuffle upstairs, which loudly moved its way downstairs and finally onto the front yard. It was dark, but my roommate Suzanne and I could make out three figures wrestling, punching, and struggling on the lawn. Two were clobbering the other, and everyone was shouting and cursing. The third fellow was truly hurt, and the others showed no signs of stopping until he was unconscious or worse. It was frightening. Sadly, my first instinct was to flee to the opposite side of the apartment where I wouldn't so easily hear the ruckus. Suzanne, on the other hand, opened the front window, knocked loudly on the glass, and yelled at them to knock it off before she called the police. But before she did, she and I had this unforgettable exchange. She said we simply had to do something; I replied it was not our business. And then she said something that changed my life. "Whenever it affects other people, it is absolutely my business."

Suzanne had her finger on the pulse of compassion, while I was hiding in the cold shadows of self-interest. Her intervention, in fact, stopped the fight.* And even though I felt pleasure when the brawl ended, I felt quite a lot of remorse at the fact that it wasn't I who stepped in. I was ashamed that I didn't think of the role I had in the story that night. It is certainly the case that I felt pleasure, but I could then and still can consider how much better it would have felt were I the one who had done the right thing.

PEH, like all forms of psychological egoism, claims that our ultimate motivation must ever and always be selfish. But PEH requires that selfish motivation to ever and always be pleasure. Yet we have seen that there are times when the pleasure itself is meaningless without our valuing something *else*. That is, the ultimate motivation cannot be the pleasure itself, but something else that makes the pleasure even possible. We can make a distinction between the *object of desire* and the *consequence of action*. The object of desire isn't always pleasure; in fact, many pleasures come only as a consequence of having and fulfilling some *other* desire.

We've noted that there are some pleasures that require other things even to exist, but let's look at the claim that getting what we want gives us pleasure. Is this really true? The claim of 1 is that we *characteristically* feel pleasure in such cases. But there are plenty of times where we get what we want and feel—disappointed. Let down.

* By the way, the fight was not what it seemed, either. The two who had ganged up on the one were in the act of saving their sister's life. This fellow—her ex—had broken into their apartment upstairs, and he was hiding in her closet with a gun. Her brothers had come home before her and found him there, lurking. Hence the brawl. What motivations did the neighbors have in their actions (even if they went too far)? Pleasure only? And was their pleasure even possible without also already valuing the welfare of their sister?

Dissatisfied. So if this argument for PEH works at all, it only works in those cases where we in fact *do* feel pleasure at getting what we want. But that doesn't give us the *always* that psychological egoism wants. It wants to demonstrate that our every action is pleasure-driven, hence selfish.

Two Thought Experiments

To tease out the problem of PEH's insistence that all we want is pleasure (premise 2 of **AFP**), let's look at two thought experiments. We'll call the first one ***Forgetful Jones***.[*] Now suppose, like Edmund at Deathwater,[†] you're faced with a morally-charged dilemma, but you also know that the moment you make a choice, you will instantly forget not only that you made a decision but also that there was any moral situation in the first place. So upon facing the weighty moment of moral truth, you know you must make a life-altering decision, but you

also know that your future self will never remember or consciously experience any of the consequences of your impending decision.

Is it impossible for you to make a decision? If your only motivation can be personal pleasure, then it must be. But it seems quite possible for us to make a choice in such a situation, despite it being impossible for us personally to knowingly experience pleasure from the decision. But one might object, we still know at least this much: our future self *will* experience the pleasure of our present decision, even if unwittingly. So let's tackle that now.

Our second experiment we'll call ***No Pain No Gain***. Suppose you are in a situation where you and everyone you love has been kidnapped by violently cruel time-travellers, who have come from the future with technologies we don't yet have. And they tell you that they will torture your every loved one for decades, with cruel and slow agonies beyond your imagination. And they will do this before your eyes: that like Húrin on the peaks of Thangorodrim,[‡] you will be forced to remain in a seat of seeing, unable ever to refrain from watching the endless torment of those you most treasure. Of course, say the futurites, there is one other alternative. You can yourself choose to be utterly annihilated, at which time the futurites will not only set your loved ones free, but will also improve their lives immensely. You, of course, will no longer exist here or in any potential afterlife. If you choose to be zapped out of existence, everyone else, they convincingly say, will be bettered.

Again, we ask, is it impossible for you to make a decision in such a scenario? It seems quite plausible that we *can* make decisions in this case. We can choose to be annihilated, even though the moment of being zapped is abrupt, and removes from us any possibility of experiencing either pleasure or pain. In such a case, you'd never experience the relief of your loved ones' release, never enjoy the pleasure of their improved lives. If PEH is true, then we cannot possibly act in such a situation, because we *know* we cannot aim towards or be motivated by any future pleasure.

This gives us good reason to question Psychological Egoistic Hedonism as plausible, let alone true. The thought experiments show us that it is unlikely premise 2 is true, that our *real* or most basic desires when acting is our own pleasure. If this were the case, we'd not even be able to *conceive* of making a decision in situations, like the thought experiments, where we cannot have—or knowingly experience—consequent pleasure from our decisions. But there's also a logical

[*] After the Sesame Street character, natch.

[†] In C.S. Lewis's *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader.*

[‡] In J.R.R. Tolkien's legendarium recorded in both *The Silmarillion* and *Unfinished Tales*.

problem. Notice the rashness of the rash jump from premise 1 of **AFP** to premise 2:

1. When someone gets what one wants, one characteristically feels pleasure.

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2. What one really wants in any voluntary action is one's own pleasure.

Notice that what 1 observes is the *consequence* or *result* of one's action, whereas 2 makes a claim about the *motivation* or *cause* of one's action. Just like AFN, there's an unjustified leap here. Suppose I go to Costco one Sunday afternoon, and while there, I run into a good friend and get to enjoy a number of tasty samples in the grocery section. Now, it is a *consequence* of my going to Costco that I got to see a friend and got to enjoy some tasty samples. But it certainly does not at all follow that my very reason, my *motivation* of going to Costco was to see my friend and eat samples. In the same way, we can see that often we feel pleasure when getting what we want, but it does not follow that this is the sole motivator—or even always a part of the motivation—of our voluntary actions.

The Paradox of Hedonism

You'd think I'd be done with this argument, having beaten it into the ground. But I'm not. It is so pervasive, this notion that all we ever want is pleasure, that our only motivation is pleasure, that it would be useful to present the ***Paradox of Hedonism***. The paradox, in sum, is this:

If all I care about is pleasure, then I get very little (if any) pleasure.

The paradox is that many times, in order for us to get pleasure, we have to quit thinking about getting pleasure. Now suppose that there's somebody Jones who in fact psychologically an egoistic hedonist. The *only* thing that motivates him is pleasure. He has no intellectual curiosity, no empathy, doesn't care a whit about animals, beauty, friendship, nature, or art. Literature bores him. TV is blaring nonsense. Movies are tiresome. Exertion of any sort in sport is exhausting and ludicrous. The sun is nothing other than a sunburn in the making; snow is just for shoveling; thunderstorms offer only the threat of power outages. Dancing is stupid. Music is intrusive nonsense. Politics is a fraud; charities are not worth his effort or consideration; business is offensive. Hobbies are a waste of time. Sex requires relationship, and he has no interest in relationship. People annoy him. Now the point here isn't that Jones is a jerk, but that Jones has *no other interest*. The only thing that Jones likes, the only motivation he has, is his own pleasure, his own happiness. He is passionate for it. It's all he thinks about, all he dreams about.

Can Jones be happy? It's unlikely, since he cannot derive pleasure from anything. When we take away any ultimate value and force pleasure itself to be that ultimate value, we find that those who *do* live happy lives, those who *do* experience pleasure are those who value other things. The way to find pleasure is to pursue something else. Here's a counter-argument to the Argument from Pleasure. We'll call it the ***Pleasure is a Means to an End*** (**MEANS-TO-END**) argument:

MEANS-TO-END

1. Pleasure and happiness presuppose desires for something other than pleasure and happiness.
2. Some people are happy and experience pleasure.

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3. Some people have desires for something other than pleasure and happiness.

The Argument from Self-Deception

Feinberg presents two more arguments people offer for Psychological Hedonism, neither of which, I think you might be able to predict, work. But to make sure this thing stays down, let's briefly look at them. The first of these is the ***Argument from Self-Deception*** (**ASD**).

> *Often we deceive ourselves into thinking that we desire something fine or noble when what we really want is to be thought well of by others or to be able to congratulate ourselves, or to be able to enjoy the pleasures of a good conscience. It is a well-known fact that people tend to conceal their true motives from themselves by camouflaging them with words like "virtue," "duty," etc. Since we are so often misled concerning both our own real motives and the real motives of others, is it not reasonable to suspect that we might always be deceived when we think motives disinterested and altruistic? Indeed, it is a simple matter to explain away all allegedly unselfish motives: […] a friendly smile is*

really only an attempt to win an approving nod […], a charitable deed is, for its performer, only an opportunity to congratulate himself […], a public benefaction is just plain good business advertising. […T]he gods are worshipped only because they indulge men's selfish fears, or tastes, or hopes; […] the 'golden rule' is no more than an eminently sound success formula, [… and] social and political codes are created and subscribed to only because they serve to restrain other men's egoism as much as one's own.

Before I begin any discussion, I want you to stop and do some analysis of your own. Think about all you know regarding the process of argument analysis.[*] Put the argument into standard form. Determine what kind of inference the argument has. Is the inference good? We've been following this process throughout this chapter, so take some notes on this argument. Do your own analysis. Why do *you* think the argument is good or bad? Type up your thoughts and bring them to class as Task 68 (please title it appropriately when you turn it in).

No, really. I'm not continuing this discussion until you do.

Done? Okay, good. Once you transformed that non-truth-bearing question into a truth-evaluable conclusion, you should have found something that looks a little (but not exactly) like this:

ASD

1. We often deceive ourselves regarding our motives.
2. All cases of apparent altruism might be cases of covert selfishness.

---

3. So every voluntary action is selfish.

This argument is a disaster. First, note that it is an *inductive* argument, which implies a probable, not a certain conclusion. But this argument, a generalization, moves from what is *often* the case to what must *always* be the case, and as such, it's fallacious. To move from *many* to *all* is to make a sweeping generalization.[†] Furthermore, it is an argument from ignorance, and as such, it's committing *another* fallacy. Two for one special, here. Recall that the fallacy is called ***argumentum ad ignorantium***,[‡] and it attempts to draw a conclusion from a lack of evidence:

1. There is no known evidence that x is false.

---

2. x is true.

But remember also that what makes a good argument (and the *only* thing that makes a good argument) is that the premises serve as *evidence* for the conclusion. In this kind of argument, we're saying, hey, there's *no* evidence, so I'm right. But this even breaks the rules of discourse by concluding something stronger than the evidence allows: if there's *no* evidence, then *any* conclusion is too strong. Notice, by the way, that by offering only fallacious generalization, the argument is offering no evidence at all for its conclusion.

Furthermore, if we think carefully, how do we detect deception? How do we know premise 1 is true? In fact, deception detection is only possible in a context of *sincerity*. Only in a world where the default setting is sincerity are we able to spot when it's not happening. Thus, the only way we can even determine the truth of 1 is if our motives are usually *not* deceptive. So we leave ASD behind as so much schlock.

The Argument from Moral Education

The last argument people tend to use in defense of Psychological Egoism (PE) is called the ***Argument from Moral Education*** (AME). Feinberg presents it thus:

[*] Chapter 4.

[†] See chapter 8.

[‡] See chapter 7.

Morality, good manners, decency, and other virtues must be teachable. […M]oral education and the inculcation of manners usually utilize what Bentham calls the "sanctions of pleasure and pain." Children are made to acquire the civilizing virtues only by the method of enticing regards and painful punishments. Much the same is true of the history of the race. People in general have been included to behave well only when it is made plain to them that there is 'something in it for them.' Is it not then highly probable that just such a mechanism of human motivation as Bentham describes must be presupposed by our methods of moral education?

Another inductive argument, AME can be summarized thus:

AME

1. Moral education (ME) presupposes morality is teachable.
2. We only teach with rewards (R) and punishments (P).
3. R and P presuppose selfish motives. (R and P appeal to selfish motives.)
4. ME presupposes selfish motives.

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5. ME presupposes there are only selfish motives.

Before we look to see whether all the premises are true, remember, we check first to see whether, on the *assumption* they're all true, that the conclusion follows. But when the argument is so carefully presented (the virtue of standard form!), we can see there's a drastic leap from 4 to 5. Even if moral education appeals only to selfish motives, it doesn't follow that our every motive in life is ever and always selfish. We can stop the analysis there, unless you want to challenge the truth of any of the premises. But ultimately, it matters not whether they're all true or not, since the conclusion just does not follow.

Conclusions Regarding Psychological Egoism

If PE is a true theory, there are powerful consequences for ethical theory and ethics as a whole. If it is the case that our *only* motivations are ever and always selfish, then it becomes impossible for us to have any ethical standard other than Ethical Egoism (EE). We cannot reasonably tell people they *ought* to act in a way that it is impossible for them to act. This is like telling people they ought to fly unaided to the moon. if the only thing we can do is act selfishly, then the only reasonable way demand on our behavior is that we act selfishly.

But this is odd. If everyone is limited to acting selfishly anyway, it seems bizarre and pointless to say that people *ought* to act selfishly. This is like me commanding sunflowers to face the sun and praising them as morally upright for doing so. There's little purpose in making a whole theory of obligation and moral justification of what cannot be otherwise.

But by now, it's pretty clear that PE has not been demonstrated as a true theory, even though it persists in popular belief. There are a lot of things we don't know about human motivations and the role of self-

On Ethical Egoism

If it isn't the case that our only motivation is egoism, is it still possible that our ethical motivation should be egoism? Here's where we get back to Ayn Rand.

Rand does not claim that all our motivations boil down to seeking pleasure or happiness. She's a bit more nuanced. She argues that the capacity or function of something determines what the proper goal or purpose of that thing should be. And she argues that the determiner of any goal whatsoever is the conditions for some living entity's survival. *Preservation* is thus the arbiter of value. Thus, whatever encourages self-preservation is deemed good, whatever hinders it evil.

For Rand, the ultimate goal is not itself pleasure, but self-preservation. She thus believes she's solved the *is-ought* problem. But has she? In fact, her statement that "the fact that a living entity is, determines what it ought to do" is circular. The thinking goes like this: this is how things are, so this is how things *ought* to be. How do we know that this is how things ought to be? Because this is how things are! Circular. The fallacy is called ***Begging the Question***, and it is the problem of assuming in the premises the very thing one is attempting to prove.

continued…

interest selfishness in ethical theory. But one thing is certain: we have little reason to accept PE. So, we have little reason to think that ethics is pointless.

NOZICK'S ANALYSIS OF RAND'S ARGUMENT

Robert Nozick poses a useful critique of Rand's argument for Ethical Egoism.* Rand makes four interwoven claims, each of which is the conclusion of an argument. These claims are themselves an argument which I'll call Rand's ***Argument for 'Objectivist' Ethics*** (OE):

OE

(1) Only living beings have values with some point to them. (Values have a purpose only for living things.)

(2) Life itself is a value to a living being which has it.

(3) The preservation and prolongation of man's life *qua man* is a value to a rational person.

(4) No person should sacrifice his interests for the interests of another.

The Problem of Unaffected Robots

In support of (1), Rand argues

On Ethical Egoism,

continued.

Let's put this in a larger setting. Consider an agrarian society, like that of the American colonies in the Eighteenth Century. Now by Rand's reasoning, whatever enables the survival and flourishing of the society would be morally obligatory (that's the *ought*). And whatever puts the society's flourishing at risk is morally blameworthy—is wrong. Thus it was morally wrong to forbid slavery, which was the backbone of the society. It was morally obligatory that America engage in slavery, since that was what enabled the flourishing of the agrarian South. But is it possible that some ways to preserve might be immoral? Is it possible that some self-preserving avenues should not be taken

Not by Rand's lights. And her reasoning is locked into this tight little conceptual circle: it *is* this way. This way is *good*. And we know this way is good because it *ought* to be this way. And we know it ought to be this way because it *is* this way. Which is good. And so on.

continued…

* In "On the Randian Argument." in *Reading Nozick: Essays on Anarchy, State, and Utopia,* ed. Jeffrey Paul (Rowman & Littlefield: 1981).

(1)

1. Only a living being can be injured, damaged, have its welfare diminished, etc.
2. So only a living being is capable of choosing among alternative actions, or
3. Only for a living being could there be any point to choosing among alternative actions.
4. Any rational preference pattern will be connected with the things mentioned in 1.
5. Values establish a rational preference ordering among alternative actions.

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6. Only a living being can have values with some point to them. (Values have a purpose only for living things.)

It is here that Rand offers her unhelpful indestructible robot thought experiment. It's unhelpful since she draws from it a conclusion larger than what is supported by it. She posits something not alive that is indestructible and infers from it that only life can originate value, but one could posit a thought experiment that considers something living that is indestructible. But either experiment is implausible, given the parameters of the actual world, where the laws of physics dictate that everything is destructible, unless you want to count the system of the whole universe. But if one counts radical change as destruction, then even the universe as a whole is destructible and only energy itself is preserved, hence it follows that the universe as a whole—arguably not alive in the manner she intends—has a preservation value of some sort.

It is unclear whether Rand intends 2 or 3 as her preferred premise. Regardless, everything hangs on 1, and 1 hangs on ambiguity (which is why we don't know whether she intends 2 or 3). Furthermore, 1 I simply false if you understand her phrase "affected by anything […] changed in any respect […] damaged, injured or destroyed" to mean any change whatsoever, which she certainly seems to intend. Aging a minute is a change. Thus her indestructible robot is necessarily changeable. If you understand her phrase to mean only negative changes are impossible (presuming we know what 'negative changes' would refer to), then it would seem that anything immortal—like God—would meet this definition, and would thus have no values whatsoever.

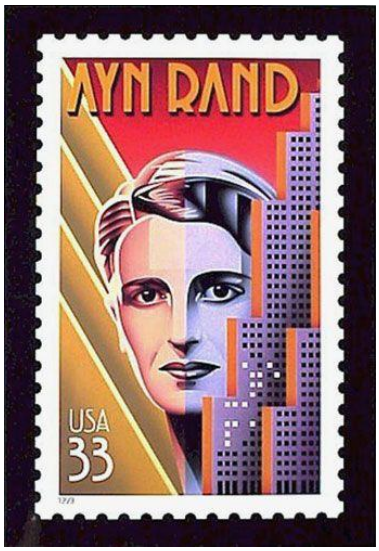
Regardless, the argument for this first premise of **OE** is unhelpful. Fortunately, it seems as if it's also unnecessary, since we can embrace a less stringent claim to the same end. Instead of saying ***only*** living beings

On Ethical Egoism,

continued.

Rand flirts with Psychological Egoistic Hedonism. She argues that our values find their deepest root in PEH. This, we know, is suspect. But her argument for Ethical Egoism (what she unhelpfully calls Objectivism) escapes the weirdness of demanding egoism from those who can only act egoistically.

She observes—rightly—that we are fallible. That we make bad judgment calls and can misjudge what is best for us. She argues that we *are* psychological egoists, so we *ought* to be egoists, but that our own judgment goes awry, so we have to think carefully in order to be sure our choices are truly self-interested. We can't help but act selfishly, but we are often mistaken regarding what it is that will best further our own interests. So we have to think carefully in order to maximize our interests in any avenue we choose.



can have values with a point to them, we can certainly conclude that living beings ***do*** have purpose-laden values (thus arguing for a sufficient, not a necessary, condition).

This, by the way, gives us a lesson in doing philosophy: we want to take care not to include in our arguments claims or theories that are neither necessary nor sufficient for key parts of our argument. Rand's argument doesn't need it to be the case that only living things are damaged or that only living things have values. So when you attempt to build an argument, take care that you don't invest claims or theories that are unnecessary and unhelpful. Keep it streamlined and simple.

The Problem of Necessary Conditions

Rand's premise (2) is where her argument seems really to take off. The argument for (2) looks like this:

(2)

1. Having values is itself a value.
2. A necessary condition for a value is a value.
3. Life is a necessary condition for having values.

---

4. Life itself is a value.

What Rand is arguing is odd, if easy to understand. She says that if we have value V, then anything that is necessary to obtain V—say some

precondition P—is itself *also* a value. Thus, since life itself is a precondition for any values whatever, life is a value.

Nozick tests her thinking by putting something into this formula to see whether there's a counterexample. A ***counterexample*** is a state of affairs where the required events/claims/facts or such all are properly in place, but where the intended definition or claim does not work.

Are all necessary conditions for values, values themselves? If getting cured of cancer is a value, is getting cancer (which is a necessary condition of getting cured of it), or having (say) a particular virus act on one, a value?

It seems ridiculously clear that not all necessary conditions for values are themselves values. We can think of indefinitely many counterexamples of valued things which have preconditions that we wouldn't accept as values.

WE CAN THINK OF INDEFINITELY MANY COUNTEREXAMPLES OF VALUED THINGS WHICH HAVE PRECONDITIONS THAT WE WOULDN'T ACCEPT AS VALUES.

We value the end of a genocide, but for it to have an end, the genocide itself was necessary. Such is the case of any termination of something bad or painful. We value the empathy and compassion of loved ones at tragic

times, but the tragedy is necessary and seems not to itself be a value. For example: the coming together of Americans after 9/11 is valued, but we wouldn't want to say that the events of 9/11, which although necessary for the coming together, were not themselves values to those who valued the coming together.

You get the point.

Rand's argument hangs on 2. If *all* necessary conditions are themselves values, then life is the ultimate value since a necessary condition for any values. But we can't get to 3 without 2.

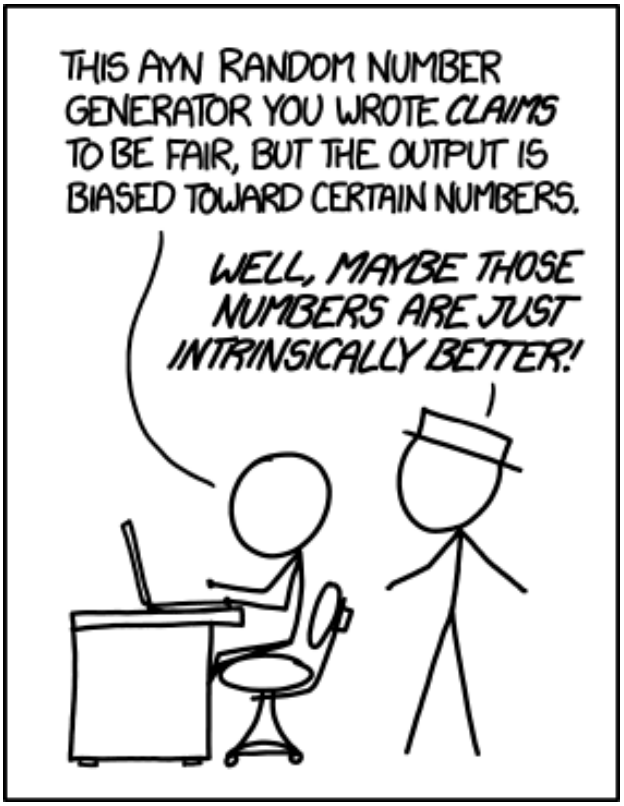
Consider John Hospers' sympathetic restatement of Rand's position as an indirect argument for (2). Suppose, Hospers writes, someone asks for a proof that life is valuable. "Rand would hold that his request contains an inconsistency"—the existence and nature of life *sets* conditions for value:

> *The concept of value […] is genetically and epistemologically dependent on the concept of life, just as the concept of health and disease are genetically and epistemologically dependent upon the concept of life. Thus to say "Prove that it is morally obligatory to value life" is similar to saying "Prove that it is medically obligatory (that is necessary for health) to value life."*

This is helpful. If we discard Rand's convoluted argument for (2), we can preserve (2) itself as a claim by means of another argument—if this one works. Of course, it's unclear whether Rand would understand this inference the way we might nowadays. Nowadays, we might see this as implying the reasoning behind *anti-abortion* policies, yet (2) is supposed be a necessary condition for (4), which we recall says that *no person* should sacrifice his interests for another. This would translate (as she avowed in several interviews) into a *pro-choice* position, since denying a woman the right to abort is to force that woman to sacrifice her interests for those of another. So if this is how we understand (2), then we cannot use it to get to Rand's ultimate conclusion, and **OE** (Rand's argument for her 'Objectivist' Ethics) fails.

There's a deeper problem with Rand's thinking, even given Hospers' attempted modification. The aim, for Rand, is to argue that a *should* can only be justified as a means to some ultimate end. Nozick notes:

> *You should do an act if it leads to the greatest realization of X (where X is the greatest value). Even if one were to accept this form of account, why must*



IS IT RATIONALITY THAT MAKES US DISTINCT? HOW DO WE KNOW? IF WE LEARN THAT RATIONALITY ISN'T THAT SPECIAL THING THAT EXPLAINS OUR MORALITY, THEN MAYBE WE SHOULD FOUND MORALITY ON THINGS LIKE MAXIMIZING UNIVERSAL WELL-BEING OR FAIRNESS, FOLLOWING MORAL IMPERATIVES, OR DEVELOPING CHARACTER.

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*we substitute something about **life** for X? Cannot content be given to should-statements […] by substituting […] "the greatest happiness of the greatest number," or any one of a vast number of other dimensions or possible goals?*

If Rand were to respond by saying that her formulation is the only *correct* one, she's yet to have given us an argument that this is the case. In short, Rand hasn't argued convincingly for (2) in such a way that it will get us to her intended conclusion (4).

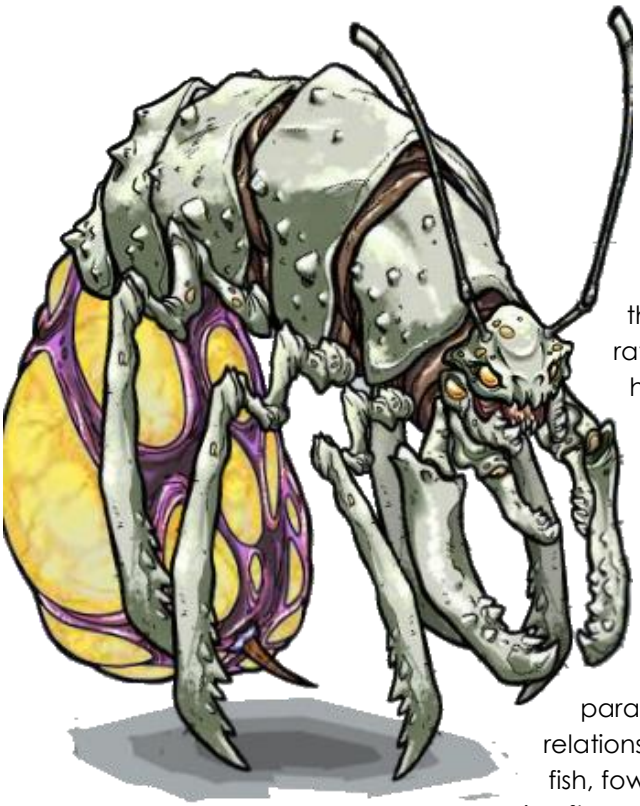
The Is-Ought Problem (The Rational-to-Moral Problem)

Still, we might as well look at Rand's argument for (3). Recall that she says that somehow we get from (2) to (3), that claims that for each man (Rand is partial to the male of the species), the preservation and prolongation of his life *as* a man (person), is a value for him. What in the world does she mean by this? What is it to be a person *as* a person?

Her phrasing is 'man *qua* man.' The term *qua* means "as such" or "only as" or "as essentially." It's a technical term that is very helpful in philosophical analysis, and it is used to narrow down the question to only the essential, only the absolutely necessary minimum, that defining 'it' that makes something what it is. So to ask what it is to be a human *qua* human is to ask what the stuff is that makes something a human and not anything else: what is the absolutely necessary *thing* that makes something human? So what Rand is saying in (3) is that the preservation and prolongation of one's life *qua* human, is a value to that person.

But what in the heck is the *qua* of being human? Is it our rationality? This seems to be what Rand intends, given her high valuation of rationality. But is it rationality that makes us distinct? How do we know? It is possible, as technology advances and we're better able to discern, that we discover that dolphins or whales are rational. If this were the case, then rationality wouldn't be that distinguishing property that sets us apart as human and not dolphin or whale. It's possible that there are other things out there that are also rational.

The issue this question points to is Rand's insistence that whatever it is that sets us apart is that which justifies our moral reasoning. We apply morality to humans, not to non-humans. If it is that the *qua* of being human is the one thing that explains our morality, then if rationality *isn't* that special thing, we can't found morality on rationality. Maybe we should found morality on



maximizing universal well-being or maximizing fairness, following moral imperatives, developing character, or some other thing. But if morality is to be based on *only* that thing that distinguishes humans from everything else, we need to be certain that we have that thing right.

The Parasite Problem

Maybe there's another way to think about (3). Maybe it's that we should prolong our life span, and to this purpose, rationality is useful (as it gets us better medicine, better housing options, etc.). Of course, one way you might use your rationality would be to let others care for you: but Rand dismisses this as a "parasitic" life, because it depends on others *not* living the way they choose to live. But why dismiss the parasite? One might say that eventually, parasites cannot persist as eventually they will run out of hosts. But this seems unlikely, despite Rand's lengthy and informal argument from *Atlas Shrugged*. There's no logical reason to infer that a parasite population cannot persist indefinitely in a symbiotic relationship with a host population: such is corroborated among fish, fowl, and other populations. (Indeed, the health of the host is often as dependent upon the health of the parasite as vice versa.)

TO ARGUE THAT PARASITES ARE— BY DEFINITION—BAD IS TO IGNORE THE EVIDENCE: PARASITES AND HOSTS LIVE INDEFINITELY IN A SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP THAT PRESERVES THE HEALTH OF <u>BOTH</u> THE PARASITE POPULATION AND THE HOST POPULATION.

One might argue against the parasite mindset by arguing that if *everyone* cannot live a certain way, then this way is immoral, and clearly the parasite—by definition—requires others *not* to be parasites. Thus, one should not be parasitical. But is this a reasonable position? "My being a teacher," observes Nozick, "succeeds only because other people do other things, e.g., grow food, make clothing. Similarly for the activities of each of these others." All ways of life require it to be the case that *not everyone* lives that way.

Maybe Rand means that if one doesn't live *as a person* that even were one to remain alive, one wouldn't *as a person* survive. But what is it to be a person? If Rand says that it is the one who lives without compromising one's self-interests towards any other person, then she is begging the question. If she means that a person is the one who follows principles—general, rational policies—and the one who fails to do this becomes a non-person, then we face the same problem. For it seems simple enough to see a so-called parasite as living such a way *on principle*. Rand hasn't demonstrated why every person should follow the *same* principles, why rational beings cannot have principles that include parasitism under certain

conditions. In short, Rand's three premises that lead to her brand of ethical egoism all fail as false or at least unlikely or ill-conceived. Each argument she builds to demonstrate these premises fails.

A Sympathetic Reworking of Rand's Argument for Objectivist Ethics

Still, suppose (for the sake of argument) that she could demonstrate (3). Does it logically lead to (4), as she wishes? Nozick presents a careful argument that might make Rand's reasoning work:

A Sympathetic Argument for OE (SYMPATHETIC)

1. For each person, the living and prolongation of his own life (as a rational being) is the greatest value for him.*
2. Each person has a right to his own life, i.e., to be free to take the actions required by the nature of a rational being for the support, the furtherance, the fulfillment, and the enjoyment of his life.
3. One should not violate 2.
4. To force a person to sacrifice his interests to your own violates 2.
5. So one should not force another to sacrifice his interests for your own or that of yet another person.
6. Each person has the right to be free to pursue his greatest and highest value.

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7. So no person should sacrifice his interests for the interests of another.

If we accept 1-6, it does seem to get us ethical egoism, appealing to values held by Rand, if not expressed so carefully by her.

But we know by now we should test each premise in turn. Nozick's reworking of (3) into premise 1 of **SYMPATHETIC** seems plausible. We do want to live as long as we can, and we want to live rationally as long as we can. Think about the idea of being institutionalized, senile, dribbling slobber down your bibbed chest, and you shudder. Not for me. Kill me first. On the other hand, if you can preserve my life so that I can live—thinking clearly to the end—to be a hundred and twenty, well sign me up. It also seems right to say

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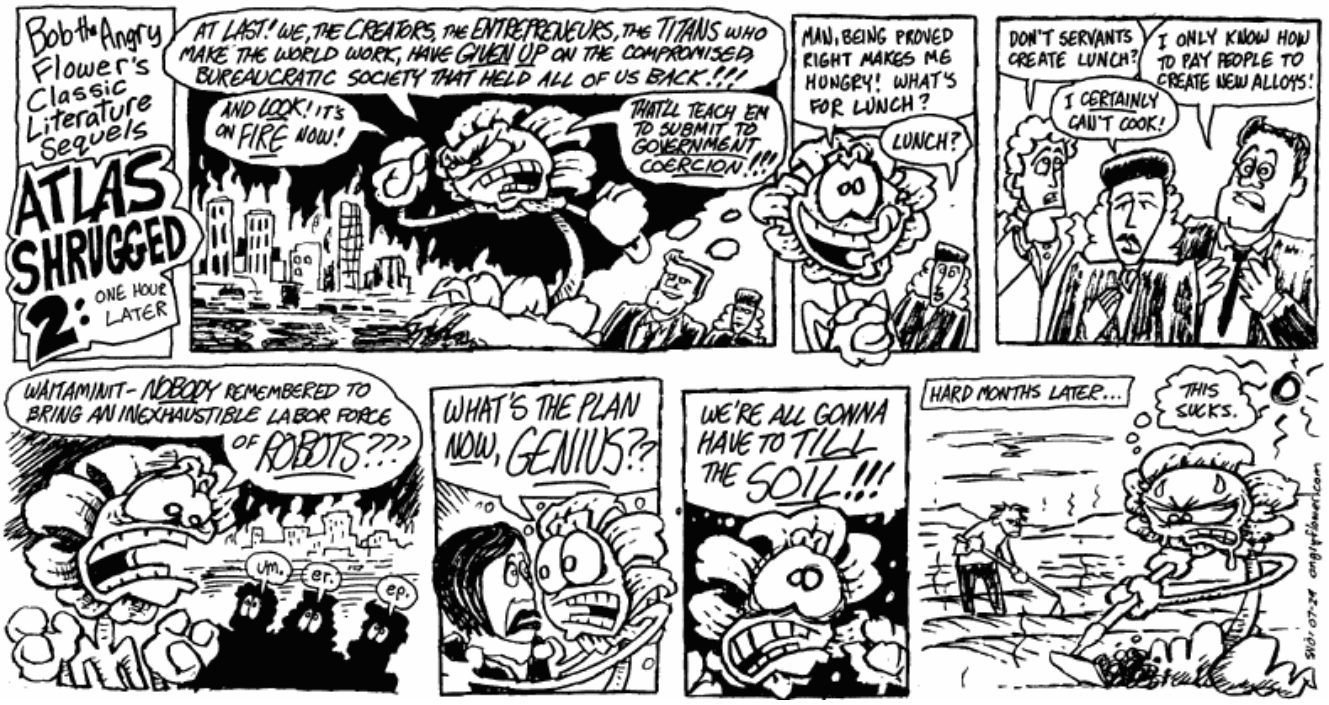
* This is a reworking of (3) that Nozick suggests Rand seems to need, though does not argue for. It seems plausible she would accept this reworking, but she doesn't outright say it. However, her arguments logically conclude with this reworking, so it is plausible to begin this argument with this instead of with (3).



that we have the right expressed in 2. And it seems right to say that if we *do* have that right (if 2 is true), then it shouldn't be violated, so 3 is true.

But what about 4? Is it possible that one can be *mistaken* about what would support, further, fulfill, and bring enjoyment to one's life? If so, then it might be that when one forces another to sacrifice interests then one is actually doing that person a favor. If not, then 4 seems to hold. Maybe it's that one cannot force a person to sacrifice *actual* interests, not simply *perceived* interests. But then how can we tell? If we mean the perceived interests, then 4 is false. But if we mean the actual interests, then 4 is unknowable. But suppose 4 is true. Then we must conclude 5.

This brings us to 6, which says that each person has a right to be free to pursue his greatest and highest value. The argument *hangs* on this. But do we really endorse such a strong claim? Isn't it possible that one could have a greatest or highest value that is horrifyingly bad? Consider a person who cannot further his life or enjoy it until all the people of a certain religious or ethnic group were eradicated from the planet. These are his interests, necessary for his highest value. So if 6 is true, then we'd have to say this person has the right to pursue his greatest and highest value. But this seems wrong.

Rand would probably say that this is an irrational value, that no rational person would desire such a thing. It's hard to see this, given that she doesn't give

SOMETIMES WE HAVE IRRECONCILABLE CONFLICTS OF 'SHOULDS' EVEN IN OUR OWN SET OF INTERESTS AND VALUES. WE CANNOT INFER FROM EVEN THIS ATTEMPTED STRENGTHENING OF RAND'S ARGUMENT THAT WE SHOULD BE EGOISTS.

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us a helpful, non-question-begging definition of rationality, but let's say she's right. Then we're still stuck on 4, which challenges 6. Rand presumes that we live in a world without rational conflicts of interest. But this is not the world we live in. In fact, sometimes we have irreconcilable conflicts of *shoulds* even in our own set of interests and values. Thus, we cannot infer from even this attempted strengthening of Rand's argument that we *should* be egoists.

Not only is *every* premise untenable in Rand's own presentation of her case, they do not jointly lead to the conclusion as she presents it, and even when they are carefully reworked, they bring us still to an ambiguity. Ultimately, then, regarding egoisms, not only are we not psychological egoists, we cannot justify ethical egoism. Randian arguments fail, and even were we to find egoism appealing, we cannot be sure we even know what our interests even are with sufficient certainty in order to ensure we are pursuing what is, in fact, in our own best interests.

THE ONLY POSSIBLE BASIS FOR A SOUND MORALITY IS MUTUAL TOLERANCE AND RESPECT: TOLERANCE OF ONE ANOTHER'S CUSTOMS AND OPINIONS; RESPECT FOR ONE ANOTHER'S RIGHTS AND FEELINGS; AWARENESS OF ONE ANOTHER'S NEEDS.

(A.J. AYER)

Endnote on Ayn Rand

[i] The quote on the bottom of this page Rand said in admiring reference to William Edward Hickman, a forger, serial armed robber, child kidnapper, and serial killer. One might think I am being unfair to Rand here, by including this quote. But in fact, this quote nicely encapsulates her ethical theory and her notion of the ideal man, whom she felt Hickman instantiated. This ideal she often wrote about throughout her literary career.

For example, her most beloved hero Howard Roark from *The Fountainhead* was envisioned by her to meet these same criteria. She wrote in her journals that Roark had "learned long ago, with his first consciousness, two things which dominate his entire attitude toward life: his own superiority and the utter worthlessness of the world" (*Journals,* 93); and that the true man knows that "one puts oneself above all and crushes everything in one's way to get the best for oneself" (ibid., 78).

She also valued human life in a meaning that is quite different from the "absolute value of humanity" understood by other worldviews, including deontologists (see chapter 18), Christians (whom she openly despised), and even Aristotle, whom she called an influence. She writes that man is *only* a man "so long as he functions in accordance with the nature of a rational being. When he chooses to function otherwise, he is no longer man. There is no proper name for the thing which he then becomes. […] When a man chooses to act in a sub-human manner, it is no longer proper for him to survive nor to be happy" (ibid., 253-254, 288). It is important to note that Rand's definition of rational functioning is narrow. Her theory holds that

> *Some person S **functions in accordance with the nature of a rational being** iff S acts always for the benefit of S's own self-interest, and never altruistically.*

Thus, Rand argues that one's *personhood* is obliterated if one does evil. Evildoers are not persons. And her definition of evil is *altruism*. It is to say that those who do evil, no matter one's definition of it, somehow undergo an ontological change so drastic (akin to death) as to no longer be persons but undefinable objects not subject to the rights or value of persons.

The non-persons she writes about in her first edition of *We the Living*. Kira (the heroine) exclaims in a flash of insight, "What are your masses [of humanity] but mud to be ground underfoot, fuel to be burned for those who deserve it?" And finally, her treatment of humanity in *Atlas Shrugged* perhaps speaks loudest in its silence. When all the titans of industry have abandoned the world, those left behind are treated as faceless, nameless parasites, leeches. Some are left in a chugging train, stopped in a tunnel, presumably to die of carbon monoxide poisoning. Others starve in the Arizona desert when they are stranded. Desperate cities like New York, devoid of the engines that bring food or medicine, are left to cannibalize themselves like Jerusalem did under the Roman siege of 70 CE. When the genocide is complete, the paragon of virtue, John Galt says, "the road is cleared. We are going back to the world." Back to the world free from any human who was altruistic, poor, disadvantaged, oppressed, or otherwise thwarted from maximizing his own self-interest, and thus incapable of being a person and earning the right to be respected, the right even to exist.

The ethical application of this endnote is important. This is the logical foundation of Rand's so-called Objectivism. She claims it is because she has the only objective understanding of reality. It seems more likely that it better expresses how she objectifies—depersonalizes—the majority of humanity. It is important to include her in this textbook because she is the icon of a very large segment of American political and social thought, and to determine rightly how we wish to live and who we should chose to follow or support, we should understand more deeply the consequences of their doctrines.

Of course, if her theory is true, then we should accept it. We should then follow it with the dedication of a William Edward Hickman. Any emotional aversion we might have would be misleading, and we should follow the rules of discourse, here, as in any philosophical pursuit of truth. But as an ethical theory, as a philosophical theory, hers must be tested against our considered opinions and weighed against other theories to see whether it can rightly claim to be the only objectively plausible account of ontology and human morality.