

Discussion Notes

Tara Smith's *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics*: A Positive Contribution to the Literature on Objectivism?

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1. Introduction

Reviews of Tara Smith's *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics*,¹ written by Objectivists, have been very positive. I believe that this is unfortunate. Smith faithfully paraphrases much of what Rand wrote about normative ethics, but distorts Rand's philosophy on pretty much any issue on which she goes beyond simple paraphrasing of Rand's statements. In many cases she directly contradicts Rand's own statements while pretending to be presenting Rand's philosophy.

In this discussion note I will point out some of the issues on which Smith has seriously distorted Rand's views that other Objectivist reviewers have either missed or have not discussed adequately. The two reviews of Smith's book I will specifically address are Stephen Hicks's 2007 review in *Philosophy in Review*,² and Carrie-Ann Biondi's 2008 review in *Reason Papers*.³

2. Conflicts of Interests

Ayn Rand's most revolutionary contribution to interpersonal ethics is the principle that there are no conflicts of interests among rational men. This principle is central to the Objectivist concept of selfishness, and is one of the principles that readers of Rand have had the most trouble understanding. For

¹ Tara Smith, *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

² Stephen Hicks, "Review of Tara Smith's *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist*," *Philosophy in Review* 27, no. 5 (October 2007), pp. 377-79.

³ Carrie-Ann Biondi, "Review Essay: Tara Smith's *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist*," *Reason Papers* 30 (Fall 2008), pp. 91-105.

any book that purports to be a presentation of Rand's normative ethics, a crucial part of its task is to give an elaborate explanation and defense of Rand's no-conflicts-of-interests principle, filling in the details of Rand's own cursory discussion.⁴ In evaluating such a book, I don't think there's any question more important than how well it succeeds in explaining and defending this principle. *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics* disgracefully fails in this task.

Smith devotes only an eight-page section to the subject of conflicts of interest. Her central argument in this section is:

[E]ven when a person's desires are rational, the proper benchmark for calculating gains and losses to interest is not what a person would like but what he actually has. Realism demands that effects on a person's interest be gauged against his actual situation rather than against a wished-for situation. . . . If a conflict means that as one person's interest advances, another's must suffer, that is not what transpires in everyday cases in which individuals compete for a good that only one of them can obtain. For failing to achieve a goal cannot be equated with suffering damage to one's present position. Being turned down for a job is not the equivalent of losing your business; being passed over for another lover is not the equivalent of having your present lover die.⁵

Not only is this a very bizarre and obviously fallacious argument, but it also directly contradicts Rand's definition of value as "that which one acts to gain and/or keep."⁶ Rand's view of value explicitly does include a person acting to gain what he doesn't already have. Smith's argument amounts to implicitly and arbitrarily defining "interest" as a subset of value, confined only to that which one already has and acts to keep; conceding that conflicts of values among rational men are possible; and then insisting that conflicts of interests, by definition, are not. This does trivially follow from Smith's implicit definition of interest, but it has no similarity at all to what Rand meant by her principle.

If Smith really believes that her argument is what Rand intended, this raises an obvious logical question: Why did Rand limit her principle to say that there are no conflicts of interests among *rational* men? If "the proper benchmark" for someone's interests is "what he actually has," then it trivially follows that conflicts of interests are *never* possible, no matter how rational or

⁴ Ayn Rand, "The 'Conflicts' of Men's Interests," in Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: New American Library, 1964), pp. 50-56.

⁵ Tara Smith, *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics*, pp. 40-41.

⁶ Ayn Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 25.

irrational the people involved. Even for those completely unfamiliar with Rand's argument in "The 'Conflicts' of Men's Interests," this logical difficulty should be sufficient to prove that Smith is badly misrepresenting Rand's argument, but Smith never says anything to address it.

In the rest of the section, Smith proceeds to paraphrase Rand's discussion of the issue, adding nothing further to what Rand has already said, and without explicitly connecting it to her own statement above. But Rand's argument, which rejects the idea of conflicts of interests based on the four considerations of reality, context, responsibility, and effort, applies to all of men's values, including goals of gaining what one doesn't already have. If Smith's paraphrase of Rand is read in the context of her previous statement, limiting the argument to "the proper benchmark [of] what he actually has," it becomes meaningless and trivial. Rand's crucial and revolutionary insight turns in Smith's hands into a game played with arbitrary definitions.

3. The Status of Kindness

In the final chapter of the book, Smith discusses the implications of Rand's ethics for "certain conventional virtues," including kindness. "Kindness" is an imprecise term, but its meaning, as Smith uses it, is synonymous with the virtue of benevolence, as explained by David Kelley.⁷ Smith repeats without attribution a simplified version of some of Kelley's arguments about the egoistic justification for benevolence, but then concludes that benevolence (or kindness, as she calls it) is nonetheless not a virtue. Smith's argument against kindness being a virtue, is that it does not guide all of a rational egoist's actions at all times; it does not apply when dealing with people who have proven themselves unworthy of kindness, which disqualifies it from being a virtue.

Smith's argument is based on a definition of virtue very different from Rand's, and also very different from the definition Smith had used up to that point in the book. Rand's definition of virtue is: "Value is that which one acts to gain and/or keep—virtue is the act by which one gains and/or keeps it."⁸ Since Smith does recognize that kindness is a means for a rational egoist to gain and/or keep his values, it is a virtue by Rand's definition. In Smith's discussion of the nature of virtue early in the book,⁹ she cites and elaborates on Rand's definition, without ever suggesting that the concept of virtue should be limited to only a narrow subset of Rand's definition, namely, those principles guiding all of a rational egoist's actions at all times. Nor does Smith ever mention such a narrow alternative definition in the later chapters

⁷ David Kelley, *Unrugged Individualism: The Selfish Basis of Benevolence* (Poughkeepsie, NY: The Institute for Objectivist Studies, 1996).

⁸ Ayn Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," p. 25.

⁹ Smith, *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics*, pp. 48-52.

discussing specific virtues. She suddenly and implicitly brings up this new, narrow definition in the last chapter, with no attempt to defend it, and serving no purpose other than to give her an excuse for rejecting kindness as a virtue.

Not only is this narrow definition of virtue arbitrary and contradictory to Rand's statements, it is also contradictory to at least two of the specific virtues Smith has discussed earlier in the book. Productiveness doesn't guide a rational egoist's choices and actions during his leisure time. Justice doesn't guide a rational egoist's choices and actions that are not related to other people.¹⁰ If we were to apply Smith's newly introduced narrow definition of virtue, these two could not count as virtues, either.

Biondi¹¹ tries to defend the application of Smith's narrowed definition of virtue, specifically in relation to productiveness, by arguing that productiveness does in fact guide even a rational egoist's leisure-time activities, because of the importance of developing the character traits conducive to productiveness. While Biondi is certainly right to suggest that productiveness is relevant to one's actions at some times outside of the time one is engaged directly in productive work, it is very far-fetched to claim that it applies to all of one's leisure activities at all times. Also, exactly the same argument would apply equally strongly to kindness; when dealing with people who have proven themselves unworthy of kindness, kindness doesn't directly guide a rational egoist's actions, but one's actions may still be relevant to developing the character traits conducive to kindness, and so kindness can still be relevant. There simply is no defensible logic to Smith's narrowed definition of virtue, or to her selective application of it to reject kindness as a virtue.

Unrugged Individualism, by David Kelley, is the definitive treatment of benevolence from an Objectivist perspective, and is of obvious relevance to any discussion of whether benevolence is a virtue (whether the writer chooses to use the word "benevolence" or to avoid it). Smith must have been aware of Kelley's book, and repeats some of its arguments. However, she makes it a point not to mention Kelley; to use a different word for the same concept; and, when rejecting Kelley's main conclusion and denying that kindness is a virtue, not to make any attempt to engage his arguments. Given this, and given the obvious fallacies Smith commits, it appears that her agenda in this section is not to clarify and defend Rand's ethics, but rather to demonstrate her factional loyalty to the Ayn Rand Institute (ARI) by attacking Kelley's view without mentioning him.

¹⁰ In his review, Hicks suggests that Rand intended the virtue of justice to apply to a rational egoist's treatment of himself, not only of other people; see Hicks, "Review of Tara Smith's *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics*," p. 379. I disagree, but debating that would be outside the scope of this discussion note. The relevant point here is that the virtue of justice, *as explained and defended by Smith*, only applies to one's relations to other people, and therefore does not guide all of one's choices and actions at all times.

¹¹ Biondi, "Review Essay," pp. 97-98.

4. Morality and Emergencies

The ethics of emergencies is a subject on which Tara Smith has a long track record of distorting Rand's views. In a previous book,¹² Smith cited Rand's essay "The Ethics of Emergencies"¹³ as discussing "the status of rights during emergencies," a statement that Smith couldn't possibly have written if she had actually read "The Ethics of Emergencies" with any attention. In *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics*, Smith continues this record with a section¹⁴ in which she attributes to Rand the idea that morality becomes inapplicable in emergency situations. Both Hicks and Biondi are rightly critical of Smith's discussion of this subject,¹⁵ but neither one of them is anywhere near as harsh as Smith deserves.

Rand, in "The Ethics of Emergencies," discusses only one difference that emergencies can make in ethical considerations: in emergency situations, the scope of help one could appropriately offer to others is much greater than in normal situations. She says nothing to suggest that there is any other difference; and regarding this one difference, she clearly states, "This does not mean a double standard of morality; the standard and the basic principles remain the same, but their application to [specific cases] requires precise definitions."¹⁶ This obviously and directly contradicts Smith's position that moral principles become inapplicable in emergency situations.

Attempting to get around Rand's statements, Smith offers a distinction between two types of emergencies, "metaphysical emergencies" versus "natural emergencies":

An emergency is metaphysical when external conditions paralyze a person's means of survival. He is plunged into physical elements in which human beings cannot survive, for instance, such as a flood, fire, or mudslide. . . . In such an emergency, . . . [m]orality is inapplicable. . . . The second type of emergency, in contrast, arises within what are broadly normal circumstances. The person is on dry land, for instance, not confronting the power of a tidal wave, earthquake, bombing, or pistol. Within such normal conditions, life-

¹² Tara Smith, *Moral Rights and Political Freedom* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), p. 118, n. 12.

¹³ Ayn Rand, "The Ethics of Emergencies," in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 43-49.

¹⁴ Smith, *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics*, pp. 95-99.

¹⁵ Hicks, "Review of Tara Smith's *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics*," p. 379; Biondi, "Review Essay," pp. 100-104.

¹⁶ Rand, "The Ethics of Emergencies," p. 47.

threatening crises can nonetheless erupt. . . . It is in these natural emergencies, I think, that the basic principles of morality remain the same, as Rand says in the passage from “The Ethics of Emergencies,” but their application may deviate from the norm.¹⁷

I agree with Biondi that this distinction is confused and unclear. It is also directly contradicted by Rand’s own definition of emergency: “An emergency is an unchosen, unexpected event, limited in time, that creates conditions under which human survival is impossible—such as a flood, an earthquake, a fire, a shipwreck.”¹⁸ Rand’s definition clearly coincides with what Smith calls “metaphysical emergencies”; even if it were possible to make some sense of Smith’s concept of “natural emergency,” it would clearly have no referents in common with Rand’s concept of emergency. Rand’s definition comes immediately after her statement, quoted above, that “the standard and the basic principles remain the same”; Rand is saying that the standard and basic principles of morality remain the same *in emergencies as she defines them here*, that is, in the situations Smith has classified as “metaphysical emergencies”—the exact opposite of the position Smith is trying to attribute to Rand.

I also agree with Biondi that Smith confuses matters further by conflating emergencies with life under a dictatorship, which does not even remotely fit Rand’s definition of emergency. Smith provides two quotations that purport to show that Rand regarded morality as inapplicable to life under dictatorships, and uses these as alleged support for attributing to Rand her position on emergencies; even if these quotations actually supported Smith’s claims regarding Rand’s view of morality under dictatorships (which, as I discuss below, they don’t), they still wouldn’t be of any relevance to the issue of morality in emergencies.

The idea that morality becomes inapplicable in emergency situations makes no sense, has no basis in anything Rand said, and directly contradicts what Rand actually said on the subject. Smith’s discussion is a muddled attempt to twist Rand’s words to fit Smith’s own view.

5. Is Morality Ever Inapplicable?

Given that Rand clearly did hold that the principles of morality remain unchanged in emergencies, is there any basis for attributing to her the idea that there are *some* situations—such as life under a dictatorship, or a confrontation with armed thugs—in which morality becomes inapplicable? Both Hicks and Biondi agree that Smith provided such a basis. But did she?

The only evidence Smith presents for attributing this view to Rand consists of two quotations. The first is the statement from Galt’s speech that

¹⁷ Smith, *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics*, pp. 97-98.

¹⁸ Rand, “The Ethics of Emergencies,” p. 47.

“Force and mind are opposites; morality ends where a gun begins.” Smith takes this statement as saying—and Hicks takes it as at least ambiguously implying—that morality is inapplicable to a victim’s decision on how to act when subjected to force, from dictators or thugs. Consider, however, the context of that statement:

Do not open your mouth to tell me that your mind has convinced you of your right to force my mind. Force and mind are opposites; morality ends where a gun begins. When you declare that men are irrational animals and propose to treat them as such, you define thereby your own character and can no longer claim the sanction of reason¹⁹

Clearly, what Rand is saying here is that the *initiator* of force can make no claims to moral or rational justification. There is nothing in this statement to suggest that the *victim* of force, in deciding how to respond, cannot apply moral principles.

The second quotation Smith provides is a statement from the book *Ayn Rand Answers*, in which Rand appears to say that morality is inapplicable to life under dictatorships. Biondi agrees that this quotation supports Smith’s interpretation regarding morality under dictatorships. The quotation, however, suffers from the same problem as do all quotations of Rand’s statements published posthumously in works edited by ARI-affiliated editors, who have proven themselves to be highly unreliable, often changing Rand’s words. It is highly problematic to use any quotation, attributed to Rand in any book edited by such editors, as evidence for attributing to her any philosophical position.

In the specific case of *Ayn Rand Answers*, the problem is even worse. Robert Mayhew, in his introduction to the book, states that “some (but not much) of my editing aimed to clarify wording that, if left unaltered, might be taken to imply a viewpoint that she explicitly rejected in her written works.”²⁰ So we know that some of Rand’s statements in the book were not just changed, but specifically changed to imply different philosophical viewpoints from Rand’s original words. The quotation Smith cites is supposed to be from the Q&A period of “Of Living Death,” Rand’s 1968 Ford Hall Forum speech. However, when a tape of this speech was offered for sale during the 1980s by Second Renaissance Books, it included only the speech itself, not the Q&A period, so there is no way to check what Rand actually said in answer to that question. There is no way to know whether Rand said that morality is fully applicable to life under dictatorships, or whether Mayhew decided that this

¹⁹ Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, 35th Anniversary ed. (New York: Signet, 1992), p. 949.

²⁰ Robert Mayhew, “Introduction,” in *Ayn Rand Answers: The Best of Her Q&A*, ed. Robert Mayhew (New York: New American Library, 2005), p. x.

“implies a viewpoint that she explicitly rejected in her written works”—and so changed the words to say the opposite.

If tapes of the Q&A period are ever released, and if we ever find out what Rand actually said, it would still be an off-the-cuff remark Rand made in response to a question, without time thoroughly to consider the question and formulate her words carefully. It would not be at all clear that Rand would have said the same thing if she had written about it in an essay.

In sum, *Ayn Rand Answers* is completely worthless as evidence for attributing philosophical positions to Rand, even more so than Rand’s posthumously published statements in other ARI-edited books. Smith’s claim that Rand believed that there exist some situations in which morality becomes inapplicable, has no basis at all.

6. Conclusion

In his review, Hicks notes “the sometimes unrecognizable portraits of Rand’s philosophy circulating in popular and academic publications.”²¹ I completely agree that this has been a serious problem in discussions of Rand’s philosophy; unfortunately, contrary to Hicks, Smith’s book only exacerbates the problem.

The three issues I discussed here are three of Smith’s most egregious misrepresentations of Rand; they are not the only ones. As long as the book is accepted as the definitive academic presentation of Rand’s normative ethics, non-Objectivist readers are likely to take Smith’s distorted presentation of Rand as if it were accurate. Worse, some of the positions that Smith attributes to Rand—most notably, the idea of morality as inapplicable in emergencies—make no sense. In all three of the issues I discuss here, and on several other issues, Smith uses obviously fallacious arguments in a context that implies that she is presenting Rand’s own arguments. The result is that, as long as readers take Smith’s book as an accurate presentation of Rand, it can only work to reduce Rand’s credibility as a philosopher.

If Rand’s philosophy is ever to be accurately understood by anyone other than Objectivists, and if she is ever to be given the respect she deserves in academia, it is crucial that the problems with Smith’s book be pointed out publicly, as I have tried to start doing.

²¹ Hicks, “Review of Tara Smith’s *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics*,” p. 378.

