

Review Essay: Tara Smith's *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist*

Carrie-Ann Biondi
Marymount Manhattan College

There has been in academic philosophy a resurgence of naturalistic virtue ethics that renders it a viable competitor with deontology and utilitarianism, making the timing opportune for the appearance of Tara Smith's *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist*.¹ Indeed, Smith in part situates her book within this trend, but also contrasts her explication of how Rand's rational ethical egoism intersects with virtue theories that have at best "danced around the edges of egoism" (p. 1). Thus far, Smith's book has been generally well received in the few reviews it has gotten,² especially by scholars and advocates of Rand's Objectivism. However, some attention from mainstream philosophers, even by those who are sympathetic readers,³ reveals that contemporary moral philosophers struggle to understand the nuanced value theory underlying Objectivism and are slow to embrace full-fledged egoism. This is hardly surprising, given that many (if not most) ethics

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

² See 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; Helen Cullyer, "Review of Tara Smith's *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist*," *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (November 12, 2006), accessed online at: <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=8123>; Robert Mayhew, "Review of Tara Smith's *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist*," *Philosophical Books* 49, no. 1 (January 2008), pp. 56-57; Diana Hsieh, "Egoism Explained: A Review of Tara Smith's *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist*," *The Objective Standard* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2007), pp. 109-19; and Shawn Klein, "Falling Short of Perfection: Review of Tara Smith's *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist*," website of The Atlas Society (October 18, 2007), accessed online at: http://www.objectivistcenter.org/cth--1986-norm_ethics.aspx.

³ Such as at an author-meets-critics symposium on Smith's book sponsored by the Ayn Rand Society and held at the Eastern Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association, December 29, 2006.

Reason Papers Vol. 30

textbooks by prominent moral philosophers demonize egoism and define ethical thinking in terms of either impartiality or altruism.⁴ A careful reading of *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics* will show that egoism—and not just virtue ethics—should be taken seriously as a robust and attractive moral theory.

Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics is Smith's most recent effort in a series of works explaining and defending the foundations and exploring the applications of Rand's Objectivist theory of value.⁵ Recapitulating and building on *Viable Values*, Smith now fleshes out the "how" of a flourishing life, that is, what it is like to manifest virtuous conduct over the course of a lifetime.⁶ This involves understanding the role that virtues play in attaining one's values, figuring out which lifelong principles/types of action are virtues, and judging how any particular virtue should be exercised in a context-sensitive fashion.

Smith starts out in chapter 2 with a compressed summary of *Viable Values*, which provides a necessary foundation for readers unfamiliar with her

⁴ See, e.g., Robert Solomon, *Morality and the Good Life*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992), p. 15: "egoism is obviously antithetical to morality," since it "means looking out for your own interests"; James Sterba, *Morality in Practice*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1997), p. 2: "Nonmoral approaches to practical problems include the . . . *self-interest approach*"; and James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill College, 1999), pp. 91 and 95, where he claims that ethical egoism should be rejected because it "cannot provide solutions for conflicts of interest" and it is "an arbitrary doctrine, in the same way that racism is arbitrary" by privileging one's own interests over those of others.

⁵ See especially Tara Smith's *Viable Values: A Study of Life as the Root and Reward of Morality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000) and *Moral Rights and Political Freedom* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995). See also, e.g., Tara Smith's "Egoistic Friendship," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (October 2005), pp. 263-77; "Morality Without the Wink: A Defense of Moral Perfection," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 29 (2004), pp. 315-31; "The Metaphysical Case for Honesty," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 37 (2003), pp. 517-31; "Justice as a Personal Virtue," *Social Theory and Practice* 25, no. 3 (Fall 1999), pp. 361-84; and "Tolerance and Forgiveness: Virtues or Vices?" *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (1997), pp. 31-41.

⁶ Smith spends just a few paragraphs in *Viable Values* illustrating "the basic relationship between normative ethics and the goal of life," noting that a proper discussion of the virtues "would require much more in-depth treatment" (p. 96). In *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics*, she makes good on an implicit promissory note that "[a] natural sequel to [*Viable Values*] would be another, consisting entirely of an elaboration of the normative prescriptions that derive from this account of morality's foundations" (p. 120 n. 25).

Reason Papers Vol. 30

previous work.⁷ Chapter 3 includes both a careful prefatory explication of the nature of virtue as such as well as a discussion of the “master virtue” of rationality. Chapters 4 through 9 discuss the remaining major virtues of honesty, independence, justice, integrity, productiveness, and pride. Each of these seven virtues is explored methodically by considering the nature of the particular virtue, why it is a virtue (i.e., why it is compatible with rational self-interest), and what it requires of us in practice. Chapter 10 considers the implications of Objectivism for four traits conventionally considered virtues: charity, generosity, kindness, and temperance. Finally, an intriguing Appendix addresses the subtler aspects of Objectivist value theory in a discussion of egoistic friendship.

Before discussing some of the specific substantive highlights of Smith’s book, I would like to remark on two noteworthy general features of her project. First, *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics* provides a much-needed translation of egoism into practice. While it’s true that Rand’s novels—particularly *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*⁸—illustrate at length what it is like to live either according to or against rational ethical egoism, the nature of the literary medium is both under-theorized⁹ and in some sense “distracting.” Readers of a good novel get swept up in the action of the character and plot developments, wondering about things like: Why is Dominique so destructive? Will Roark ever get to design another building? Can Dagny save her railroad? Who is John Galt? Seeking answers to these questions can lead one to focus on sub-themes or to dwell on the narrative of a particular character in which one is interested, which easily distracts one from the underlying philosophical ideas that explain the larger context of conflict, choice, and character. One needs the familiarity of a first reading in order to achieve a deeper knowledge that comes from re-reading, reflecting on, and discussing a novel. Rand herself described John Galt’s lengthy speech in *Atlas Shrugged* as the “briefest summary” of her Objectivist system with “its fundamentals . . . indicated only in the widest terms,” and stated that her first collection, *For the New Intellectual*, could “serve as an outline or a program or a manifesto” until she “complete[s] the presentation of [her] philosophy in

⁷ For an extensive critical review essay of *Viable Values*, see Irfan Khawaja, “Tara Smith’s *Viable Values: A Study of Life as the Root and Reward of Morality: A Discussion*,” *Reason Papers* 26 (Summer 2003), pp. 63-88.

⁸ Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (New York: New American Library, 1971 [1943]), and Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: New American Library, 1985 [1957]).

⁹ Hsieh makes a similar point; see her “Egoism Explained: A Review of Tara Smith’s *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist*,” p. 111.

Reason Papers Vol. 30

a fully detailed form.”¹⁰ Smith thus carries on some of the “unpacking” work that Rand began in the later part of her life, and does so in *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics* in a way that serves as a bridge between the more abstract theorizing of “The Objectivist Ethics”¹¹ and the more concrete depictions in Rand’s novels.

Second, Smith identifies and addresses some of the contemporary philosophical literature on ethics and virtue theory (primarily in Chapters 1, 9, and 10, and to some extent in Chapter 6). While not as extensive as it might have been, this effort enters into a somewhat Millian spirit of discussion. John Stuart Mill famously argued for engagement with beliefs one takes to be false on the ground that grappling with them allows for “the clearer and livelier impression of truth produced by its collision with error.”¹² The virtues of this approach are that the Objectivist ethics is presented more sharply and fully than it might otherwise have been, and readers can see for themselves how Smith’s account of Rand’s theory contrasts with competitor views. For moral philosophers encountering Rand’s views for the first time, such an entry point is orienting and invaluable.

One of the strong points of Smith’s explanation of Objectivism is how lucidly she rejects the morality/rationality dichotomy ubiquitous in the contemporary literature on “reasons for action.”¹³ She states that “the fact that rationality is a practical tool for advancing the values that fuel a person’s

¹⁰ Ayn Rand, “Preface,” in her *For the New Intellectual* (New York: New American Library, 1961), pp. vii-viii. This collection contains Rand’s essay “For the New Intellectual” as well as essential excerpts from her four novels (*Anthem*, *We the Living*, *The Fountainhead*, and *Atlas Shrugged*).

¹¹ Ayn Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in her *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: New American Library, 1964), pp. 13-35.

¹² John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1985 [1859]), p. 76.

¹³ A paradigm example is the highly influential book by David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), in which he announces that “[m]orals by agreement begin from an initial presumption against morality, as a constraint on each person’s pursuit of his own interest. . . . He considers what he can do, but initially draws no distinction between what he may and may not do,” pp. 8-9. This trend of dichotomizing rationality and morality has not abated, as can be seen in the advertisement for a forthcoming collection of essays on this topic: “What are our reasons for acting? Morality purports to give us these reasons, and so do norms of prudence and the laws of society. The theory of practical reason assesses the authority of these potentially competing claims”; see the book description for *Reasons for Action*, ed. David Sobel and Steven Wall (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Reason Papers Vol. 30

life is exactly what makes it moral. A naturalistic account of morality denies a sharp distinction between the moral and the prudential. Morality is prudent. The pivotal observation, again, is that reason is man's means of survival" (pp. 60-61). The fragmented self offered up by Hobbesian-influenced subjective preference theory has permeated economics and modern moral philosophy and caused much unnecessary hand-wringing over which reason(s) should motivate and/or justify action—and it is this that Smith directly challenges. Smith understands people's reluctance to embrace egoism when the images largely projected have been of "selfish egoists" who are "materialistic, hedonistic, emotion-driven, or predatory" (p. 284). Her steady insistence on a proper understanding of self-interest—with a whole and wholehearted self guided by the ultimate principle of human life, of "man's survival *qua* man"¹⁴—is crucial to rejecting caricatures that conflate psychological with ethical egoism. She makes clear that survival is "not simply breathing" or the "attainment of the barest essentials of subsistence," but rather "a condition of flourishing—which means: living in such a manner that one is fit to continue to live, long term" as the *type of being* that one is born as (p. 28). Her explanation builds on Rand's central point that a human needs to live by "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."¹⁵ We can thus see how crucial is the claim that the "master virtue" of rationality *is* moral, since the proper exercise of one's rational faculty is required in order to live well.

Another important contribution Smith makes is systematically to explain Rand's moral case for capitalism in her chapter on the virtue of productiveness. "Productive work," while not the only valuable activity that one engages in, "should be the central purpose of a person's life," Smith explains (p. 198). One has to make a living in order to survive, and this requires each person to use his creative mind in relation to the world (i.e., exercise rationality) and bring forth "material values, whether goods or services."¹⁶ Material values are the valued goods that are brought "outside of the agent's mind" and made concrete, be it in the form of a car, the act of waiting on a table in a restaurant, a painting, or a musical composition (p. 199). Productive work is not "a necessary evil," but rather "it is entirely a good, insofar as it makes our lives and happiness possible" (p. 206). The split

¹⁴ Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," p. 24.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1991), p. 292. See generally, Ayn Rand, "What Is Capitalism?" in Ayn Rand, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (New York: New American Library, 1967), pp. 11-34.

Reason Papers Vol. 30

between work and happiness is yet another false dichotomy in moral thought that Smith helps dispense with. Perhaps someone might “rather be fishin’” than at work (p. 198), but this would be on account of his not being in a line of work fully satisfying to him rather than because work is a “necessary evil.”

Ideally, each person would be able to sustain himself by a vocation that pressed upon the limits of his potential and with which he passionately identified. However, the exploratory nature of human interests makes it likely that one will have to try several things before finding out what one really likes to do, and life in a market economy entails that one might not get employed in the line of work one really likes to do. Given both of the preceding facts, one’s ideal vocational outcome might not occur. Smith here begins to develop Rand’s distinction between “philosophically objective value” and “socially objective value” (i.e., “market value”) in order to deal with the familiar claim that work is drudgery and requires people to give up what they value in order to survive. Smith explains that when the sort of material value that a person might be good at creating (say, writing philosophy books) is not valued in the marketplace and so cannot yet be traded freely in a self-sustaining way, then that person can pursue the production of that “more challenging, more rewarding” material value “on his own time” and “find a job that allowed him adequate time and energy for that” as well as supported him financially (p. 208). She admits that this discussion could be developed a good deal more, but notes that for her purposes the relevant point has been made, namely, that since “life requires, at root, the creation of philosophically objective material values rather than of socially material values, *the virtue of productiveness is not contingent upon a person’s ability to create the latter*” (p. 209, emphasis mine). A person who waitresses by day and writes novels or paints in the evenings is not compromising any moral value; rather, she is both being productive and self-sustaining in the manner suited to a good—that is, rational—being.

In keeping with the general theme of depicting a proper understanding of egoism, this account of productiveness also flatly rejects there being any place for “greed” (understood as *pleonexia*¹⁷) in the good life. This might seem daunting, given that Smith claims “that there is no limit, in principle, to how materially rich a person should strive to make his life” (p. 217). However, she deftly handles two of the biggest misconceptions that

¹⁷ According to Liddell and Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon*, *pleonexia* is a characteristic possessed by individuals who are “grasping” for “undue gains,” “greedy,” or “overreaching” to “excess.” Alasdair MacIntyre, though, articulates more fundamentally and precisely that “the character trait itself, *pleonexia*, is no more or no less than simple acquisitiveness, acting so as to have more as such”; see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 111.

Reason Papers Vol. 30

critics have about the pursuit of material goods: that egoists will do anything to get more goods (i.e., they're unprincipled) and that egoists place infinite and thus insatiable value on the acquisition of material goods (i.e., they're materialistic and superficial). Smith refuses to condemn the desire for material values *per se*, since "[t]hat desire, in fact, is unassailable. For it is necessary for human life" (p. 218). Instead, she disentangles the sloppy assignment of the word 'greedy' to someone who simply desires material values from cases where someone violates rights to get some particular goods as well as from cases where someone mistakenly sees inherent value in the acquisition of particular goods rather than understanding the role that such goods can play in a rational life. (This is an especially timely reminder of the nature of rational ethical egoism, given standard accusations about the pursuit of "self-interest" as having caused the 2006-2008 U.S. credit and sub-prime mortgage "financial crisis.")

If Smith had stopped at discussing material values when explaining productiveness, she might have left herself vulnerable to Diana Hsieh's objection that "productiveness does not seem to satisfy [the] criterion" of a "genuine virtue," namely, to "make full-time demands of a person, guiding all his choices and action."¹⁸ Hsieh bases this objection on the claim that "[a] rational egoist ought to rest, relax, and enjoy the fruits of his labor. In so doing, he will always be purposeful but not always productive."¹⁹ However, Stephen Hicks rightly notes (but does not discuss) that one of the "gems of insight" in Smith's book is "the connection between productiveness and (non-religious) spiritual values."²⁰ The pursuit and attainment of material values provide far more than the means of long-range self-sufficiency; they also require, are productive of, and largely constitute the rich array of spiritual values to be gotten from such activity. Productiveness requires a person to "make himself into the kind of person who is able to provide all the material values that his life requires"; as Leonard Peikoff states, "The ability to create material values . . . must itself be created" (p. 202).²¹ Thus, how one spends one's leisure time is crucial for cultivating the mental capital needed to be productive, and "[m]uch of the spiritual value of productiveness rests in the qualities of character called upon for a person to exercise this virtue" (p. 203).

¹⁸ Hsieh, "Egoism Explained: A Review of Tara Smith's *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist*," p. 116.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Hicks, "Review of Tara Smith's *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist*," p. 378.

²¹ Smith is quoting Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 295.

Reason Papers Vol. 30

In short, productiveness: (1) “fosters valuable character traits,” such as independence, rationality, honesty, integrity, commitment, patience, creativity, etc.; (2) “furnishes the foundation for rational coherence in a person’s activities” by allowing a person to select and order other activities and relationships during one’s leisure time in relation to one’s central purpose; (3) “strengthens a person’s identity” by seeing the values he identifies with made manifest by him in the world around him; and (4) “nourishes his self-esteem” by validating his sense of efficacy when he succeeds in producing value (p. 205). The tandem effect of material and spiritual value-production is a full-time, life-long activity, and so productiveness does meet the demanding criterion of a genuine virtue. One can hear echoes of Aristotle’s discussion of the proper use of leisure time, which (perhaps counterintuitively to some) is an instance of productiveness in the broad sense that Rand and Smith give it.

Smith is especially to be commended for her nuanced exploration of Rand’s value theory in the Appendix “Egoistic Friendship.” Discussion of this rich topic warrants a cottage industry all its own. It will suffice here to remark on how Smith advances the discussion of the *constitutive* and *individualized* nature that value can have, especially in the context of special human relationships such as friendship. Moral philosophers typically characterize value as either intrinsic/inherent or instrumental. Intrinsic/inherent value obtains when something is valuable for its own sake. Instrumental value obtains when something is useful for the sake of some other end. This dichotomy is often used to defend the need for altruism in human relationships, as in the following argument: Either you place intrinsic value on your ends and others are instrumentally useful to them, or you eschew your own ends and sacrifice yourself in order to contribute to others’ intrinsically valuable ends. Since instrumental use of others is immoral, altruism is required. Hence, it follows that “[e]goists cannot be authentic friends or lovers, . . . since, qua egoists, they can value others only instrumentally” (p. 287).

Smith, however, argues for a way past this instrumentalization of self or other by pointing out once again the existence of a false dichotomy.²² The

²² And she does so in a way that is reminiscent of, but different from, Immanuel Kant’s “Humanity Principle,” which maintains: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.” See Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James Ellington (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981), p. 36. This is no place to explain the vast differences between Rand’s and Kant’s moral theories, but two key differences important to note here that make a difference in how they each justify the not merely instrumental treatment of others are that Kant suppresses man’s physical nature in his conception of moral agency and he rejects egoism in favor of impartialism.

Reason Papers Vol. 30

reasoning begins with the claims that a healthy person has a particular identity (i.e., a set of life-enhancing values that he stands for), he comes to love someone for himself as a friend on account of the shared values that he manifests through various character traits and activities, and the “well-being of his friend becomes folded into his own . . . because the flourishing of someone who is of value to [him] strengthens [his] own capacity to flourish” (pp. 290-91). Smith rightly points out that this view “has affinities with Aristotle’s contention that a friend is another self” (p. 290 n. 5). Lest someone think that this valuation of a friend is still too instrumental, Smith adds two clarifications. First, she notes that things can be valuable to a person in many ways that are not equivalent to a directly causal “means-end manner,” such as the way a hammer can be used to drive in a nail and then either discarded or replaced with another hammer without any loss. Additional ways of valuing something or someone apart from oneself include as “enhancements,” “preconditions,” or “components of multi-faceted values” (p. 302). One’s life can be deeply enriched by the objective, agent-relative, and irreplaceable values created by a good marriage or character friendship. Second, she explains that the false dichotomy in value theory “rests on a serious confusion about the way in which values function in a person’s life” (p. 302). It is not that there is some separate end called happiness that one chases, causing everything else to be a mere instrument to the attainment of that end. Rather, “values are the content of life. It is these that a person seeks when he seeks his happiness” (p. 303). In other words, pursuing and enjoying a “value-stocked life” that promotes one’s flourishing *constitutes* happiness. Among the constitutively valuable goods that comprise an inherently valuable life is egoistic friendship.

It could be alleged that Smith gets Rand out of one problem only to land her in another. This, at least, is what Helen Cullyer seems to suggest in her review of *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics*. It is precisely the constitutive dimension of egoistic friendship that Cullyer points to as causing a shift from individualistic egoism to a deeply social self. She thinks that Smith’s view leads to a subtle (and to Cullyer welcome, though not individualistic) shift in how to understand a person’s flourishing from “rational trading of benefits between contractual individuals” to “activity of the individual who is fully immersed in shared activities and purposes.” In the latter case, “the ‘I’ tends to become a ‘we’, and the other and self united in a relationship that promotes *our* happiness.”²³ This would certainly saddle Smith and Rand with a view

²³ Helen Cullyer, “Review of Tara Smith’s *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist*,” *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (November 12, 2006), accessed online at: <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=8123>.

Reason Papers Vol. 30

that they would not recognize as egoistic, since there would be no distinctive self apart from others whose good is achieved.

But Smith has the resources to answer this objection in a fully egoistic way. There is on her view a metaphysically distinct self, who has an epistemically distinct understanding of what is good for that self, and that is brought to any particular relationship. As the relationship develops and deepens, there are certainly goods that emerge from sharing the activities and there are underlying values that can only be experienced in response to and in some sense with the other person, but the underlying locus of such experience are the two selves who undergo, enjoy, and reflect on the experience. Smith quotes Rand: “One falls in love with the embodiment of the values that formed a person’s character, which are reflected in his widest goals or smallest gestures, which create the *style* of his soul—the individual style of a unique, unrepeatable, irreplaceable consciousness” (p. 298).²⁴ Such “embodiment” creates on many levels an irreducibly individualized experience of the constitutive good of egoistic friendship. In addition, the ultimate beneficiary is each self, each with its own conceptualization and concretization of the general human good that can only be realized in each person’s lived experience. I take it that this is what Smith has in mind when she claims that “love must be selfish both in its source and in its aim. It must emanate from a self and it must be for the self” (p. 293). One can identify very closely with the values of another without becoming identical to the other either metaphysically or morally.

For all of *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics’s* excellent qualities, however, Smith’s discussion of the ethics of emergencies is incomplete and unclear. The issue is raised by Hicks:

How do moral principles apply in cases of life-or-death emergencies? Here the question in the Objectivist literature is whether Rand intended for the scope of moral principles to be universal (with special application to such non-standard cases), or limited to the standard cases (implying that one steps outside the realm of morality when dealing with liars, thugs, or emergency situations).²⁵

Hicks thinks that there is textual evidence in Rand’s work that can support either interpretation, and that Smith has an “informed” but “not decisive”

²⁴ Smith cites Ayn Rand, “Philosophy and Sense of Life,” in Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto* (New York: Penguin, 1975), p. 32.

²⁵ Hicks, “Review of Tara Smith’s *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist*,” p. 379.

Reason Papers Vol. 30

defense of “the latter, ‘Morality is inapplicable,’ position” on some issues.²⁶ Hicks is right to suggest that the complex issues involved in this debate need more attention than Smith gives them, but he is wrong to think that Smith fully endorses the “morality is inapplicable” position. The difficulty is that it is not in the end clear what Smith is endorsing.

It is true that Smith says things such as “[i]n such an emergency . . . [m]orality is inapplicable” (p. 97) and she quotes Rand’s response to a questioner in a public forum who asked a question about moral conduct under a dictatorship: “In such a case, morality cannot say what to do. Under a dictatorship—under force—there is no such thing as morality. Morality ends where a gun begins” (p. 95).²⁷ However, Smith distinguishes between types of emergencies—metaphysical and natural—and argues, drawing evidence from Rand’s “The Ethics of Emergencies,” that morality is not “silenced all together” or “totally inapplicable” in natural emergencies (p. 98).²⁸ Smith states that metaphysical emergencies occur “when external conditions paralyze a person’s means of survival” and “all a person can do is try to escape the crisis and return to metaphysically normal conditions” (p. 97). She includes in this category floods, fire, earthquake, and gun-wielding thugs, and it is in these contexts that Smith claims that “[m]orality is inapplicable” and it is “impossible for a person to abide by morality and survive” (p. 97). In contrast, natural emergencies are intermittent events, such as having to rush a suddenly ill spouse to the hospital, that “place a great value at risk” and that occur from time to time throughout a person’s life because “it is in the nature of human beings to die, eventually, and injury and illness are naturally occurring causes of death” (p. 98). In this sort of case, a spouse could violate moral principles by breaking into a neighbor’s house in order to use the phone to call for an ambulance, but should compensate the neighbor for breaking into the house. Smith explains: “The compensation is due out of recognition of the fact that it was a crisis to one’s own values, not to human life as such, that warranted the transgression of basic moral principles and out of respect for the enduring propriety of those principles” (p. 98). By claiming that not all emergencies are the same, Smith avoids endorsing fully one interpretation over the other, at least as Hicks depicts the options.

Smith’s distinction between metaphysical and natural emergencies is problematic as stated. The way in which she draws the contrast is both

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Quotation from *Ayn Rand Answers*, ed. Robert Mayhew (New York: Penguin, 2005), p. 114.

²⁸ See Ayn Rand, “The Ethics of Emergencies,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 43-49.

Reason Papers Vol. 30

strained and difficult to apply to concrete examples, including the paradigmatic case of an emergency in “The Ethics of Emergencies,” namely, a case where a man risks his life in order to save his drowning wife, whom he deeply loves and without whom he thinks life would be unbearable.²⁹ This case possesses elements of both categories of emergency, natural and metaphysical, so it is unclear how to categorize it on Smith’s taxonomy. On the one hand, the case involves a life-threatening context where all that the drowning wife “can do is try to escape the crisis and return to metaphysically normal conditions,” thus making it sound like a case of metaphysical emergency. Yet, on the other hand, Rand discusses the man’s need to maintain his virtue of integrity by not irrationally panicking and backing out of the rescue, which requires moral action, and so sounds like a case of natural emergency. The preceding difficulty is compounded by the fact that *all* of the examples in both categories (flood, fire, earthquake, muggers, injury, illness) are “naturally occurring causes of death,” and might be relatively common depending on where someone lives (e.g., a coastline, rough neighborhood, or a fault line). What, then, distinguishes metaphysical from natural emergencies?

To complicate matters, Smith adds thugs and dictatorships to the category of metaphysical emergency, which Rand did not originally include in her listing of such emergencies in “The Ethics of Emergencies.” Smith then problematically draws on a response to a question about the possibility of morality under a dictatorship from the question-and-answer period of a lecture Rand once gave. But this answer does not resolve Smith’s problem, because dictatorships do not fall under Rand’s definition of emergency (i.e., “an unchosen, unexpected event, limited in time, that creates conditions under which human survival is impossible”³⁰). While life under a dictatorship may in many cases be unchosen or even unexpected, it is not plausibly described as a *single event* limited in time. Indeed, it might unfortunately last someone’s lifetime, or at least a substantial length of time that makes it unlike a case of being mugged at gunpoint. What, then, defines emergencies as such?

Since the distinction between metaphysical and natural emergencies raises issues concerning theoretical coherence, one needs to step back and re-examine the larger context and purpose of the topic. Rand discusses the relationship between ethics and emergencies in order to expose the fact that many theorists argue for altruism by taking “lifeboat” scenarios as the starting point for generating moral principles.³¹ They mistakenly extend supposedly

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 45-46.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 47.

³¹ Smith, though, discusses the relationship between ethics and emergencies in her chapter on the virtue of honesty. The discussion arises in a subsection where she

Reason Papers Vol. 30

self-sacrificial conduct performed in emergency cases into everyday life and hold up altruism and suffering as the standard and norm. Rand argues that both the interpretation of the conduct and the direction of analysis are wrong: “The fact is that men do not live in lifeboats—and that a lifeboat is not the place on which to base one’s metaphysics. The moral purpose of a man’s life is the achievement of his own happiness. . . . [D]isasters are marginal and incidental in the course of human existence—and . . . *values*, not disasters, are the goal, the first concern and the motive power of his life.”³² Moral principles must be generated from normal human life as the standard, and then that standard of rational ethical egoism applies consistently across contexts. Self-sacrifice is never called for, not even in emergency situations.³³ When the husband risks his life to save his drowning wife, it is “for the selfish reason that life without the loved person could be unbearable,” and when a man helps out strangers during a hurricane, it is because of the “generalized respect and good will which one should grant to a human being in the name of the potential value he represents—until and unless he forfeits it.”³⁴ Rand rejects the ethics-of-emergencies approach that altruism relies on, and she begins to illuminate how moral theory can properly be applied to emergencies.

This larger context of “The Ethics of Emergencies” makes it puzzling how the “morality is inapplicable” view enters the scene, since it sounds like one *can* apply rational ethical egoism even in emergency situations. The puzzlement is deepened if one wonders about fictional scenes like the one in *Atlas Shrugged* where John Galt has an extended conversation about morality, choice, and action with Mr. Thompson, who is holding Galt captive at gunpoint.³⁵ This confusion is unfortunate, since I think that Smith has the resources to develop and clarify the issue, but does not do so here, and the distinction between metaphysical and natural emergencies merely muddies the waters. Essential to resolving this difficulty is keeping in mind that Rand

addresses the Kantian-inspired challenge to the “contextually absolute” nature of moral principles.

³² Rand, “The Ethics of Emergencies,” p. 49.

³³ Contrary to Roderick Long’s claim that “curiously enough, what Rand seems to be saying in ‘The Ethics of Emergencies’ is that it is the ban on altruism that is lifted,” p. 47; see Roderick Long, *Reason and Value: Aristotle versus Rand*, Objectivist Studies, no. 3 (Poughkeepsie, NY: The Objectivist Center, 2000), pp. 5-64. Long seems, mistakenly, to equate any assistance to others with altruism; see *ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

³⁴ Rand, “The Ethics of Emergencies,” p. 46.

³⁵ Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, pp. 1018-26.

Reason Papers Vol. 30

defines morality as “a code of values to guide man’s choices and actions,”³⁶ and that this code involves values and virtues. Values are what one aims to attain and virtues are types of action that allow one to attain those values. We base our life-saving actions in constrained life-threatening circumstances where at least some action is possible on the ultimate *moral value of life*, since a “rational man does not forget that *life* is the source of all values.”³⁷ We could imagine ahead of time what we should do if faced with unwelcome circumstances (and perhaps even develop our imagination in fiction). Virtues cannot be applied as usual in these contexts, since doing so would not be in one’s rational self-interest, but we do not cease being virtuous when we have to figure out how to adapt our conduct to an unusual circumstance. For example, one has no out-of-context duty to be truthful to a mugger who holds a gun to one’s head; if lying to a mugger is in one’s self-interest, then it is right to do so, and one’s virtue of honesty is not undermined in this particular act of lying. Perhaps Smith is giving a nod to this line of thought in a footnote, when she claims, “Only free action can be rational. Thus, a victim’s response can be described as ‘rational’ only in a circumscribed, artificial sense” (p. 96 n. 40). If Smith means to concede some sense of rationality to a victim in an emergency, then morality is *fully* applicable, and not just in “a circumscribed, artificial sense.” However, her “concession” is qualified and grudging, and her (and Rand’s) unwillingness to see morality as applicable when at least some action is possible is unwarranted.

And there still remains the puzzling claim about morality’s not being applicable under a dictatorship. What if one lives under a dictatorship for a lifetime? Is this a case of non-emergency or a chronic series of emergencies? Does this mean that one would have to develop a different set of “virtues” on alternative understandings of value and virtue for living through what is the “norm” for humans in this society? Would one have to opt for suicide, if the possibility of overthrowing such a regime and having a life worth living was extremely low? Or would one need to struggle against such a regime in the light of the moral values and virtues proper to free men? These questions, as well as the preceding ones, can only be answered after the nature of an emergency, types of emergencies, and their relationship to rational ethical egoism are developed more adequately.

In any case, Smith has done us the valuable service of elucidating the virtuous activities that comprise the life of the rational ethical egoist, and doing so fully, clearly, and in conscientious keeping with the corpus of Rand’s thought. She has also—in applying Objectivism to not-yet-explored or under-

³⁶ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” p. 13.

³⁷ Rand, “The Ethics of Emergencies,” p. 46.

Reason Papers Vol. 30

discussed issues—helped to unpack the meaning and account of the theory in ways that develop it. The demands of the reality-oriented virtue of independence require each person to figure out with his own mind what is true. The path is thus open to scrutinize, challenge, develop, and further justify the insights Objectivism offers—both Smith’s example and Rand’s theory, on its own terms, invite us to set foot proudly in this direction.³⁸

³⁸ I am grateful to Irfan Khawaja for valuable feedback on an earlier draft of this essay.

Reason Papers Vol. 30