

Discussion Notes

THE RANDIAN ARGUMENT RECONSIDERED: A REPLY TO CHARLES KING

CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS of the ideas of the philosopher/novelist Ayn Rand are often most interesting, especially in what they say about the critic and about Rand's relation to today's philosophical orthodoxy. In "Life and the Theory of Value," J. Charles King continues the criticism of Rand's ethics undertaken by Robert Nozick in his article, "On the Randian Argument."¹ Nozick's critique was examined in an article by Douglas Den Uyl and Douglas Rasmussen, to which further reference shall be made later.² Ethical egoism is one of the pillars of Rand's philosophy; it is from this base that she unfolds her social and political ideas.³ Insofar as Rand holds that a consistent view of the free society cannot be advocated on any base but her own, a criticism of her ethical position has far-reaching implications for those who support Rand's political as well as ethical views.

The purpose of this article is to examine King's criticisms in the light of Rand's work and to discover toward what kind of an answer, if any, Rand's philosophy would point. Rand might not have given her unconditional support to the view of ethics that develops; the purpose here, however, is not so much to defend Rand as to use her work to illuminate and defend ethical egoism.

ULTIMATE VALUES AND ENDS IN THEMSELVES

King begins his criticism by distinguishing between an "ultimate value" and an "end in itself." Where Rand states that "it is only an ultimate goal, an end in itself, that makes the existence of values possible," King argues that she conflates two separate concepts.⁴ In par-

ticular, he argues that, since an “end in itself is something that is desired for its own sake, not merely as a means to something else. . . any system of values must contain at least one end in itself.” This is true because the idea of means makes no sense without the idea of ends.⁵

On the other hand, a system of values need not contain an ultimate value, according to King. “If there is in any system of values an ultimate value, then that value will be an end in itself. But there may be in a system of values no ultimate value whatever, while there are any number of ends in themselves.”⁶

This observation is important because it is taken to open the possibility for a number of primary, competing ends. “A code of values may admit of any number of ends in themselves and may not be organized so that one particular value plays the role that Rand assigned to ultimate value.”⁷

It may here be useful to introduce Rand’s definition of the term “value” in order to be clear about what it is that is being discussed. For Rand, a value is “that which one acts to gain and/or keep”—it is the object of action of a living being, whether intentional or not.⁸ An ultimate value is the final object of the action of a living being.

It is thus King’s contention, if he is arguing on the basis of Rand’s definition, that the question, “Why act to gain X?” for certain objects of action has no meaning—these values are primary; they are ends in themselves.

It seems questionable that more than one such value could exist for the same person, at least. King himself recognizes the fact that values are ranked, so that choices between alternative courses of action can be made; the logical question is, “With respect to what?” For a ranking to exist, there must also exist a standard; this implies maximization or minimization of some single parameter. Hence, it is not clear how King escapes from the idea of an ultimate value.

A candidate for the position of ultimate value need not specify all other values by a process of deduction. For instance, the “ultimate value” for a ranked system containing what King might refer to as multiple ends in themselves, insofar as he maintains that desire is all that is necessary to account for value, could be formulated as the maximization of the fulfillment of desires. It is certainly the case that many men treat this *as if* it were the ultimate value. This may be the “default setting” for human beings at the preconceptual stage; once man starts to think, it becomes his guiding principle if his final answer to “Why?” is “Because I want to.”

Here one recognizes the need for actions and desires to be justified; that is, to be made acceptable to reason according to some criterion. Without such justification, neither ethics nor morality could exist at all.⁹ Following Hume, a desire-based morality recognizes no means of obtaining an “ought” from an “is.” This is why it seeks to explain purposeful actions using a few primary desires, or the fact of desire, which, being the only kind of being with an “ought” component,

becomes the irreducible foundation for an ethical system.

Rand's view, however, is different. An eudaemonist ethics maintains that only certain types of desire should be acted upon, i.e., valued. Furthermore, the criteria by which these desires are created or chosen lie within the reason, and make no reference to desire *per se*. Desire, in other words, may originate in a source outside desire.

It is possible to value that not all one's desires be fulfilled. If a desire is considered unethical, for example, one may devalue it—act so as not to gain the desired object. The things one acts to gain or keep may be determined by reason, regardless of other desires.

Not all desires, then, must be valued in Rand's sense. It is equally true that not all values must be desired, unless one wishes to assign the term "desire" to the goal-directed behavior of plants, for example. *Moral* values, however, must be desired, and furthermore justified or approved by the reason, in order to be considered such. A sleepwalker does not act on moral values; he is not held responsible for what he does in that state.¹⁰

The status of an ultimate value such as Rand's will be examined after the following section, which lays the groundwork for an objective standard of value.

THE THEORY OF VALUE

King takes Rand and her followers to task for connecting the alternative of existence and nonexistence to the possibility of goal-directed behavior. "Den Uyl and Rasmussen are simply mistaken in supposing that alternatives could not make a difference to an entity that did not face the difference between existing and not existing," he states.

Simply imagine that one suddenly finds, through whatever means, that one has been made immortal. One cannot be destroyed no matter what. Perhaps one's body has been impregnated with a chemical from a strange planet that renders one's tissues impervious to disruption of their structure from any force existing in the universe. There is no reason in supposing this hypothesis of indestructibility that we would lose all interest in what is going on around us. Even if we knew that we were ourselves indestructible, we might still like to eat (to be sure, on the hypothesis that even if we didn't eat, we would still survive, but we might, after all, simply enjoy the taste of a good steak); we might still enjoy the pleasures of the bottle; we might still enjoy the association of friends; we might still be interested in philosophical problems and so on ad infinitum. The mere removal of the possibility of destruction would not remove a whole range of the interests or desires of ordinary human life. Thus, it would be quite possible for one who is totally indestructible, nevertheless, to have a very rich system of values.¹¹

King goes on to maintain, "What a being must have to have value is, rather, the capacity for desire or preference or caring."¹² The

capacity for desire, then, is to be sufficient to explain why man has a code of values.

Note that this is not sufficient to answer Rand's question. Rand asks not why man *has* a code of values, but why man *needs* a code of values.¹³ If "life is a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action," then the fact that action is self-generated is sufficient to account for the *existence* of values; the fact that life is self-sustaining accounts for the *function* of values.

Since life is a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action, a living being must act to gain or keep certain things to sustain itself. To be a living thing, it is necessary to have values. Since only living beings face the fundamental alternative between life and death, the reason for which a living being *has* values is to sustain its life.¹⁴ As Den Uyl and Rasmussen point out:

Death, a living thing not being, does not require any actions for its maintenance. Death is not a positive way of being. Rather, it is a negation—the absence of being a living thing. It has no required actions; it has no needs. Death cannot be an ultimate value, then, simply because it does not require any actions and cannot be the reason or cause of goal-directed behavior.¹⁵

This argument, however, is not complete. The Randian argument hinges not on valuation being a necessary condition for life, but on life being a necessary condition of valuation. This is what King attempts to deny with his "indestructible man" argument.

What *are* the necessary conditions for valuation? If we take Rand's definition of value, that it is something one acts to gain and/or keep, then at least the action of the valuer must be self-generated. It is the one who *values* who acts to gain or keep a value; this action cannot come from outside.

Rasmussen and Den Uyl point out three other implications of valuation: that there is an alternative present, that the agent's actions could achieve or fail to achieve the value, and that the alternative must make a difference to the agent. The last point is especially important: "If the result of failing to achieve some end were ultimately no different than the result of achieving that same end, there would be no significance to either achieving it or not achieving it. Hence no *alternative* would be faced by the entity."¹⁶

King's example of the "indestructible man" is actually an attempt to show that a being whose action was self-generated but *not* self-sustaining (i.e., a nonliving being) could have values. This is the case because the fundamental alternative that living beings face, existence or nonexistence, lies in the fact that life is self-sustaining. King attempts to show that a being that does not face this fundamental alternative could still have values.

The unconditional nature of this being must be clarified. Its existence is not necessary because nothing can interfere with its self-sustenance. If this were true, it would still be self-sustaining, it would

still need values, and its existence would *still be contingent upon the achievement of those values*. In other words, it would still face the fundamental alternative of existence or nonexistence, even if nothing can interfere with the achievement of its values.

No, the being must continue even without sustaining itself. It must continue even if the being does not value continuing, if it tries to commit suicide, for example. Perhaps a suggestive parallel is the Christian idea of the immortal soul, which, when consigned to hell, suffers eternal torment amid the flames. It is this type of being that King claims can possess values.

This, however, is simply not the case. If the *whole* process of action of the being is not self-sustaining, but unconditional, then the alternative can make no difference to the entity. On the other hand, if the achievement of the goal makes a difference to the entity, then *some* part of its existence was contingent on the achievement. This part of its existence may be viewed as self-sustaining and constitutes the life of the being.

What King has done in his example of the “indestructible man” is to exclude from the domain of life choices about any consideration of physical survival. This man has no more control over the survival of his body than a normal man over the survival of the atoms in his cells. However, merely because this has ceased being part of his domain of choice does not entail the cessation of his life as a contingent process. Rand would be the first to insist that a being’s life consists in more than its physical survival.

Now it is true that an ethics constructed for such a being would be quite different than one for normal men. Since its capacity for choice could not be destroyed, the holding of its life as an ultimate value would consist in preserving the capability for choice; i.e., keeping interested in things, choosing long-term goals, and avoiding boredom, indifference, or despair, which would entail an end to alternatives and thus to life. The fact that its physical survival would be guaranteed would result in its having an ethics far more subjective in appearance than that of a human being. For this type of being, whose very survival depends solely on an act of choice, Robert Nozick’s condition of “not having achieved all values” might be ethically relevant. Normally, however, such a condition does not require action in order to be maintained.¹⁷

But arguing over the ethics of immortal beings is not the main point here. What is important is that “man’s life *qua* man” is more than just physical survival. Since valuation implies an alternative, it implies *some* contingency in the being of the valuer, which implies self-sustenance. Life is therefore a necessary condition for valuation.

The demonstration that life is the ultimate value has not yet been accomplished, however. The argument for man’s life as his ultimate value begins with the recognition that beings whose action is self-sustaining, living beings, face the alternative of continuing to exist as self-sustaining or of failing to do so. Being alive *means* having one’s existence as the fundamental object of one’s action—life is the

ultimate value for beings that are alive. Ceasing to be alive, on the other hand, means no longer having any values at all, as has been seen above. A living being must both *act to* sustain its life and succeed in doing so if its action is to be called self-sustaining.

Acting with the goal of sustaining one's life is, therefore, a necessary but not necessarily sufficient condition for a successful life. If a being's life is made up of all of the self-generated, self-sustaining actions that it takes, then each action taken implies that a portion of that being's life is conditional upon that action. Every alternative a being faces thus exists only in so far as its life is contingent.

Since all evaluation must be made in terms of some contingent goal, then it may be said that all alternatives open to a living being are evaluated (subjectively) with respect to the fundamental alternative of life or death.

An ultimate value for a living being, then, is something that that being cannot help but to act to gain and/or keep, even if its action does not in fact attain that goal. The action of a living being is judged according to whether it does in fact reach that goal. Insofar as man is concerned, choice is involved in valuation, so that a man's actions are judged by whether he has chosen to take the proper means toward achieving his ultimate goal.

The status of Rand's ultimate value for man now becomes evident: by whatever standard a man consciously judges what is good, all of these standards in fact ultimately reduce to "man's life," the objective ultimate value for man. This does not mean that man will always follow the objectively proper course of action—his perceptions of the proper means to achieve this end may be mistaken or mutually contradictory. A code of morality is not simply given to man; he must use his reason to discover it. Even should a man know *what* constitutes the morally proper course of action, he may not understand the reason *why*; he may thus be open to violating his moral principles in various circumstances. He is still, however, acting in pursuit of "man's life," though not in the right manner. In addition, even if man adopts the proper means, success in reaching his ultimate goal is not guaranteed to him. What is meant here is merely that, in any choice, man chooses what to him at that moment appears to be the means to achieving "man's life."

One may therefore conclude with Den Uyl and Rasmussen:

Given that life is a necessary condition for valuation, there is no other way we can value something without (implicitly at least) valuing that which makes valuation possible. Paradoxically perhaps, we could value not living any longer, but in making such a value we must nevertheless value life. . . . Therefore, we cannot "suppose" death or anything else (other than life) as the ultimate value, for the very activity of "holding something as a value," let alone as an ultimate one, depends on life being an ultimate value in the sense of "ultimate" discussed earlier. Thus there is an inconsistency in the request "prove that life is valuable." The very meaning of "valuable" presupposes the value of life.¹⁸

The argument also sheds light on King's contention that "even were this argument acceptable, it would only succeed in showing that life was always a value as a *means*, not that life was an end in itself or certainly not an ultimate end. . . to the extent that one valued having placed a value on (a) thing, then one valued life as a means, since it was the condition that enabled one to place a value on the thing at all."¹⁹ This argument is in fact much too narrow; it ignores the fact that the achievement of a value is *part* of the life of an organism. "Man is a being of self-made soul." The reason that life is a necessary condition for valuation is because a life is what results when values are pursued by action. Thus life is not a means for valuing, but the *end* of valuation.

King's criticism of the rational life as the natural end for man depends heavily on his earlier arguments. If it is true that man has an objectively proper end, then it is no longer true that "if reason is to be confined as (*sic*) merely gathering knowledge of what is, then it cannot set goals."²⁰ King deliberately places reason outside the possible sources of desire. Yet, if "ought" is understandable, and can be derived from "is," then the concept of a rational desire is perfectly acceptable.

THE MORAL LIFE

The preceding section may leave the impression that, since a life is in fact what results when values are pursued by action, then the act of pursuing values suffices to gain and/or keep life as the ultimate value. If this were the case, it would be impossible to derive any ethical significance from the fact that life is an ultimate value.

This impression occurs if one confuses subjective and objective points of view. A person may be pursuing some value and actually achieving some portion of his life, but only at the expense of a more objectively important part that he has neglected. In other words, the content of man's choice affects his prospects for survival.

Different alternatives that man faces, then, have different moral weights. That which determines whether man's life has in fact been achieved is his nature as man.

Now what does it mean for "man's life *qua* man" to be the ultimate value for man? This concept is explained in depth in Rand's essay, "The Objectivist Ethics." Nevertheless, a brief statement of its meaning might take on the form: a successful life lived by one's own effort, according to courses of action determined by one's reason, and the awareness of the significance of that fact.

This statement is intended to incorporate and clarify the meaning of Rand's cardinal virtues. Man must sustain his own life (be productive), he must use his reason in order to do so, as his values cannot be attained automatically, and he must understand and accept the reasons for which he follows such a code, holding his life as his own highest value.²¹ In addition, a fully successful human life includes the

attainment of the specific values that are pursued; this is what is meant by a "successful life" in the above statement.

Rand examines other virtues in her article; these establish some further universal moral precepts. They do not, however, serve as principles from which one is to deduce a complete moral code indicating what to do under every circumstance. For instance, the actual goals to be chosen by the individual as constitutive of his life are not determinable by deduction from the above principle.

On what basis, then, are these choices made? This involves what David Norton refers to as finding one's *daimon*, the one self out of the many possible selves that is related to the actual self by the relation of potentiality. Specifically, one's possible alternatives are determined by what abilities or talents one has. The weighing of possible alternatives, with a view toward becoming an excellent human being, toward doing "that which I, alone, can do," is for each individual to determine himself.²²

The pursuit of these goals, however, is guided by the moral principles given by man's natural end. Let us take as an example King's rich golfer, who spends his life in the "elusive quest for par." It may be useful to place this example next to one of an Olympic athlete who gives his all for a gold medal. Someone with a feeling for Rand's work would suspect that her approval would lie with the latter, but probably not with the former.

If this is the case, it is probably not because of the sport chosen, for there is no reason why golf is intrinsically less moral a sport than any other. The difference must lie in the way the activity is approached. In the case of the Olympic athlete, Rand would probably maintain that his activity is productive, while she would not for the golfer.

The difference between the productive golfer and the unproductive golfer may be illuminated by a few questions: Does he spend time trying to *perfect* his game? Does he subscribe to golf magazines? Is he fascinated by new improvements in equipment? Does he seek after others who might teach him to improve? Are his friends also impassioned golfers? In short, does he play the game with the idea of perfecting it, or because he has nothing else to do with his time? Is he engaging in productive, rational activity, or does he seek to escape living? Golf becomes the life of the man who sets it as his goal. Avoiding choices, avoiding life becomes the goal of the rich and idle golfer.

King's example, then, at least if interpreted in a certain way, shows the importance and meaning of the virtue of productiveness. Here again it is important not to confuse life with physical survival. A person may and must remain productive even after he has made his first million.

The example can also be used to illustrate the virtues of rationality and pride. Rationality is a condition for productiveness. If our golfer can't be bothered paying attention when he plays, if he does not seek to learn how to improve, then he is not facing the game with the requisite rationality. If after having played well, he attributes this fact to luck, or confesses that his wife is the one who gets after him to play,

then he is not showing the requisite pride in his achievement.

These virtues are not merely the means to an end. The virtues *constitute* part of the end; they are the human element in man's goal directed action. They flow from man's nature and indicate what is meant by "man's life *qua man*."

Another moral principle mentioned in King's article is that of rights. The principle of human rights follows from the fact that each man is a self-sustaining being, and that his survival as human must ultimately come through his own effort. This is the meaning of Rand's statement that each man is an end in himself. The condition necessary to man's proper survival in society is that this self-sustaining action not be interfered with by other men. This principle deserves a great deal of elaboration; it may be the case that Rand's treatment of it was too superficial. Nevertheless, man's right to control his own life does seem to be a legitimate conclusion from this view of man; what becomes problematic is how to define interference.

From the criticisms raised by J. Charles King in his article it becomes evident that it is quite easy to misunderstand the philosophy of Ayn Rand. On the other hand, when one begins to consider the criticisms in the light of Rand's writings, one appreciates her achievement in condensing and rendering readable such a complex system. Rand's egoistic philosophy, properly understood, is not a code for those who seek pleasure or physical survival at any price, rather it is a guide for those who seek to live successfully and properly as human beings, without neglecting any aspects of their nature.

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1. See J. Charles King, "Life and the Theory of Value: The Randian Argument Reconsidered," in Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen, eds., *The Philosophical Thought of Ayn Rand* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), pp. 102-121. And see Robert Nozick, "On the Randian Argument," *Personalist* 52 (Spring 1971): 282-304.

2. Douglas Den Uyl and Douglas Rasmussen, "Nozick on the Randian Argument," *Personalist* 59 (April 1978): 184-205.

3. Rand refers to her position as one of ethical egoism. Her use of this term is somewhat problematic, as she thus lends herself to being misinterpreted as a Hobbesian; the label "eudaemonism" applied to her philosophy would make the distinction clear. Nevertheless, in light of the fact that the arguments of the post-Kantian philosophers against whom Rand sets herself are directed as much against eudaemonism as against other varieties of egoism, Rand's use of the term "egoism" might be justified as a forceful and unabashed rejection of altruistic ethics. In this article, "egoism" will be used to refer to Rand's ethical position.

4. King, "Life and the Theory of Value," pp. 107-108.

5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ayn Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," in *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet Books, 1964), p. 15.
9. See especially Henry Veatch, *For an Ontology of Morals* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971).
10. While it appears that such a system condemns man to a life of unfulfilled desires, it does so less than might appear. Eudaemonist philosophers often maintain that the adoption of rational rules of conduct leads to a state in which immoral desires no longer arise. If this is true, the amount of desires unfulfilled by an egoist might be less than under some other systems. On the other hand, the principle based on the satisfaction of desire easily lends itself to the Buddhist solution: desire nothing, and you will not go unsatisfied. In any case, the eudaemonist maintains that man can lead a happy and proper life even if all his desires have not been fulfilled, and that whim is not an ethical primary.
11. King, "Life and the Theory of Value," p. 109.
12. Ibid., p. 110.
13. Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," p. 13.
14. Ibid., pp. 15-16.
15. Den Uyl and Rasmussen, "Nozick on the Randian Argument," p. 191.
16. Ibid., pp. 189-90.
17. Ibid., p. 192: "These premises can be best examined if we will but consider Nozick's example of cancer being the necessary condition for the existence of the value 'being cured of cancer.' Strictly speaking, cancer is a necessary condition for the *state* or *condition* of 'being cured of cancer,' but it is *not* a necessary condition for the existence of the *value* 'being cured of cancer.' According to Rand, values do not exist without valuers, and 'being cured of cancer' is a value only in relation to a living being which values that state or condition. As Nozick understands premise (2) of this three-step argument, cancer would have to be a value if one valued being cured of cancer. Here, Nozick views values in a manner Rand would call intrinsic. Rand, however, could view premise (2) as not requiring that cancer be a value, because something is a value only in relation to someone's ability to value, and cancer is not a necessary condition for that."
18. Ibid., p. 191.
19. King, "Life and the Theory of Value," p. 111.
20. Ibid., p. 114.
21. See Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," p. 25 ff.
22. David L. Norton, *Personal Destinies* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976).

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