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Tara Smith

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Introduction

Much recent discussion in ethics has danced around the edges of egoism, as renewed attention to virtue ethics, *eudaimonia*, and perfectionism naturally raise questions about the role of self-interest in a good life. Although the ancient Greek conception of ethics that is currently enjoying a revival does not fit stereotypes of egoism, it certainly does not advocate altruism. As Rosalind Hursthouse acknowledges, much virtue ethics portrays morality as a form of enlightened self-interest.¹ Although authors increasingly have defended aspects of egoism (see, for instance, David Schmidtz, Jean Hampton, Neera Badhwar),² the overwhelming majority of ethicists remains averse not only to endorsing egoism but even to seriously considering it. Those who do speak on its behalf usually urge that we incorporate discrete elements of egoism, such as self-respect, alongside altruistic obligations. Rather than urge that we replace altruism with egoism, in other words, they seek to reconcile select self-beneficial qualities with the altruism that we all already “know” morality demands. This latter assumption remains ubiquitous. Christine Korsgaard’s claim

¹ Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 190. Hursthouse does consider virtue ethics an “unfamiliar version of that view.”

² David Schmidtz, “Reasons for Altruism,” *Social Philosophy & Policy* 10, no. 1 (Winter 1993), pp. 52–68; Schmidtz, “Self-Interest: What’s in it for Me?” *Social Philosophy & Policy* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1997), pp. 107–121; Neera Kapur Badhwar, “Altruism versus Self-Interest: Sometimes a False Dichotomy,” *Social Philosophy & Policy* 10, no. 1 (Winter 1993), pp. 90–117; Badhwar, “Self-Interest and Virtue,” *Social Philosophy & Policy* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1997), pp. 226–263; Jean Hampton, “Selflessness and the Loss of Self,” *Social Philosophy & Policy* 10, no. 1 (Winter 1993), pp. 135–165; Jean Hampton, “The Wisdom of the Egoist: The Moral and Political Implications of Valuing the Self,” *Social Philosophy & Policy* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1997), pp. 21–51.

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that "... moral conduct by definition is not motivated by self-interest" is typical.³

Consequently, the questions raised by these recent developments in moral philosophy have not been adequately pursued. Is *eudaimonia* a selfish end? What does selfishness actually mean? What sorts of actions does it demand? What are the implications of pursuing *eudaimonia* for a person's relationships with others? Yet another nascent movement in ethics, perhaps spawned by virtue ethics, also points to a need to confront egoism more squarely: the advocacy of naturalism as the foundation of morality. In the past few years, Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Berys Gaut have all defended the idea that the bedrock source of proper moral norms rests in needs dictated by human nature. A little earlier, James Wallace's *Virtues and Vices* (1978) advocated the same basic view.⁴

In *Natural Goodness*, Foot argues that goodness is a function of our nature. Moral evaluations reflect facts about human life, just as evaluations of sight and hearing in animals reflect facts about animals' potential and performance. Our nature dictates that we need morality: "... for human beings the teaching and following of morality is something necessary. We can't get on without it." Foot endorses Peter Geach's claim that "men need virtues as bees need stings."⁵ Hursthouse follows Foot in maintaining that the "moral" does not carry distinctive authority, but is an outgrowth of our nature. We do well to start in ethics by thinking about plants, Hursthouse writes, meaning that a living thing's nature will dictate what is good for it by pointing us to its needs. What living things do is live, Hursthouse observes, and a good living thing is one that lives well. For humans, certain traits are virtuous because of facts about human needs, interests and desires, just as certain traits make for a good elephant

³ Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 134. Korsgaard is attributing this view to Prichard, but she does not question it. Thomas Nagel similarly simply assumes that the source of moral requirements rests "in the claims of other persons." Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 197. For a few other such characterizations that weave self-sacrifice into the very concept of morality, see Julia Driver, *Uneasy Virtue* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 105, and Laurence Thomas, *Living Morally* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), p. vii. For a critical discussion of this conception of morality, see Kelly Rogers, "Beyond Self and Other," *Social Philosophy & Policy* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1997), pp. 1–20.

⁴ Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001); Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*; Berys Gaut, "The Structure of Practical Reason," in Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut, eds., *Ethics and Practical Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); James D. Wallace, *Virtues and Vices* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 1978.

⁵ Foot, pp. 24, 16–17, 35, citing Peter Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 17.

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because of facts about elephants' needs, interests, and desires. The point relevant to egoism is that goodness is determined by what is beneficial *for the organism*.⁶

Gaut similarly sees the roots of objective values in our biological natures. Value is a teleological concept, he reasons, and for living organisms, the teleological is biological. "Trees can have *good* roots because trees have goals, specified by their nature, and good roots are those which help achieve these goals." It is human beings' physical and psychological needs that establish the nature and requirements of our flourishing.⁷

Much in these naturalistic accounts is sound, I think, such as the bridging of what are usually understood as two distinct senses of the "good life": an enjoyable life and a morally upright life. On a naturalistic account, these go hand in hand. It is only by leading a morally upright life that a person can be happy and it is for the sake of having a happy life that a person should be morally upright. I also welcome that which allows this convergence: naturalism's denial of a sharp difference in kind between the counsel of morality and the counsel of prudence. Foot sensibly regards acting morally as part of practical rationality; morality holds no further claim on us.⁸ Insofar as what is good is what serves an organism's needs, it is good for that organism, such that the good makes prudential sense. In these respects, naturalism opens the way for egoism, as do versions of virtue ethics that encourage the pursuit of *eudaimonia*.

Yet this is where most philosophers draw back. Foot and Hursthouse clearly wish to distance themselves from any such implications. Foot, for instance, insists that the moral does not simply consist of doing what is good for oneself, though she concedes that a "reasonable modicum" of self-interest is permissible.⁹ Reluctance to engage the potentially egoistic ramifications of their views is, I think, a serious shortcoming. Neither the virtue ethics nor naturalism movements truly challenges the altruistic prescriptions embraced in nearly all ethical theories. The charge that virtue ethics offers old wine in new bottles has definite merit, as virtue ethics has focused far more on the form of ethical guidance – virtues rather than rules or principles – than on its substance. I do not mean to minimize the value that greater attention to virtue can bring. The emphasis virtue ethicists place on an individual's context and psychology and

⁶ Hursthouse, pp. 123, 196, 205, 230. Hursthouse's and Foot's views on this bear obvious affinities with Aristotle's.

⁷ Gaut, pp. 185, 178, 184–185, 186, emphasis added.

⁸ Foot, p. 9.

⁹ Foot, p. 16, 17.

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their more value-oriented conception of ethics (as opposed to a duty-bound, “stay out of trouble” conception) are constructive contributions. Yet the essential content of the do’s and don’t’s being advocated has not been sufficiently questioned. Correlatively, when it comes time to explain why a particular trait is a virtue or vice, intuitions too often stand in for arguments, as possibilities that would revise received wisdom are not seriously entertained. This aversion to questioning entrenched assumptions about the substantive directions of morality is particularly surprising in naturalism, since naturalism presents observation of facts as the basis for objective judgments of value. To allow assumptions of what kinds of action are virtuous to circumscribe the account of morality’s roots defeats the point of such an account. Indeed, it renders it not truly naturalistic by transforming the purported roots into mere props – drapery for normative conclusions that a theorist is already committed to and is intent on keeping. Hursthouse explicitly acknowledges this: if, early in her theorizing, it looked as if courage, honesty, justice, and charity were not to turn out as virtues, she confesses, she would abandon naturalism.¹⁰ Such an approach obviously skews the results by preempting an open inquiry into all the possibilities, including the potentially egoistic ones.

In this book, I will present a kind of egoism that I believe escapes the concerns that usually make people loathe to even consider it. My subject, in a nutshell, is how to lead a selfish life. I will elaborate on the virtues of proper egoism – the kinds of action required for human beings to advance their interests and to flourish. More specifically, I will present the egoism of Ayn Rand. Rand’s egoism is distinctive insofar as she contends that a determination of the proper way to lead our lives must begin with an analysis of the concept of value. This analysis yields a portrait of what a person’s interest *is* that requires the rejection of many of the doctrines commonly associated with egoism, such as hedonism, materialism, and predation (which is based on the assumption that promotion of one’s own well-being must come at the expense of others’). The pursuit of self-interest should not be driven by emotion, in Rand’s view, but by reason, and reason demands the consistent practice of seven principal virtues. I will explain how to lead a selfish life primarily by elaborating on these.

If one is going to pass a judgment on egoism, it is important to know it in its strongest form. This is what I think Rand offers. It is equally important to get Rand right, as her views have been subjected to tremendous distortion over the years. (I did not recognize the Rand that Hursthouse

¹⁰ Hursthouse, p. 211; see also p. 170, note 10, and p. 208.

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cursorily dismisses.)¹¹ Whatever one's final verdict on the merits of Rand's theory, we cannot have confidence in our assessment until we give that theory a full and fair hearing.

My primary aim is to explain Rand's view of the virtues that an egoistic morality demands. In my last book, *Viable Values – A Study of Life as the Root and Reward of Morality*, I presented the case for egoism by examining the nature of morality itself, probing the fundamental nature and validation of values, from which moral prescriptions follow.¹² Here, I turn from the questions of what it is to be moral and why such prescriptions are necessary to *how* to be moral. The heart of this book fleshes out the meat of morality's practical guidance. We will consider what types of actions are virtuous, and why – how these serve a person's true interest. In essence, the book is an account of what Rand's rational egoism consists of and requires.

Because egoism is widely perceived as reckless, self-indulgent whim-worship and the selfish person as thoughtless, unprincipled, and inconsiderate of others, the suggestion that egoism can demand the disciplined adherence to a moral code will itself be surprising to many. In laying out what egoism's guidance consists in, part of what I mean to convey is that egoism does require a coherent, principled effort. In the process, I hope to indicate some of the strength of rational egoism. Yet these are secondary objectives. Although mine is a sympathetic elaboration, my aim is not to convert the reader. Much as I find Rand's egoism compelling, my paramount aim in this book is not so much to convince you, as to show you what Rand's theory is, as it has not received the attention it warrants. If we are to reach sound conclusions about the promise of virtue ethics and naturalism, we must pursue all the questions that they raise, including questions about egoism. Rand's theory offers a valuable, previously underexplored means of doing so.

A word about sources. Ayn Rand did not elaborate her moral philosophy in lengthy treatises. Her views are presented in her fiction (which includes a hero's extended philosophical speech in *Atlas Shrugged*) and in relatively brief essays. I will rely heavily on the essay "The Objectivist

¹¹ Hursthouse, pp. 253–254. Contrary to Hursthouse's description, Rand does not distinguish "the weak and the strong" and claim that they should be "evaluated differently." Nor does she hold (either implicitly or explicitly) that self-realization calls for "injustice and callousness."

¹² Tara Smith, *Viable Values – A Study of Life as the Root and Reward of Morality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield), 2000. Throughout this book, I will often use "egoistic" to mean rationally egoistic, unless the context clearly indicates otherwise.

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Ethics,” her most extended single presentation of her overall view of ethics, though I will also make use of many of her other writings. At times, I will refer to passages from her private journals and letters, published since her death, and to unpublished archival material. Whenever I do so, it is important to recognize that such passages cannot be treated as Rand’s final, ready-for-publication views. I will also treat Leonard Peikoff’s *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, a systematic presentation of the entirety of Rand’s philosophy, from metaphysics through esthetics, as an authoritative source of her views. Peikoff studied with Rand for thirty years, and she endorsed his course on Objectivism, on which he later based this book, as fully accurate.¹³ Where I venture beyond what Rand or Peikoff have themselves said about a specific question, it should be understood that I am offering my best interpretation of the position that is implied by Rand’s express philosophy. Obviously, these inferences are fallible; I do not write as an official spokesman for Objectivism.

OVERVIEW

I will begin, in Chapter 2, by reviewing the defense of egoism that was presented over the course of my last book. Although necessarily abbreviated, this argument will indicate the core explanation of why we should be egoists and thus lay the foundation for exploring how to be.

On Rand’s view, the phenomenon of values stands at the base of morality. Values are intelligible only in relation to a living organism’s struggle for its life. Nothing is valuable to or for inanimate objects. The distinction between good and bad is an outgrowth of the nature of living things; more specifically, it reflects their survival needs. (Note the obvious similarity with the recent writings of Foot, Hursthouse, and Gaut.) Certain ends are essential if organisms are to maintain their lives. For human beings, moreover, certain types of actions are necessary if we are to achieve those ends. Accordingly, Rand argues, the standard of value is life. Value is a relational phenomenon and any particular thing’s value reflects its bearing on a specific individual’s life. Something can be valuable only in relation to some organism and for that end: its continued existence. This relationship obtains independently of a person’s beliefs or wishes about it. Thus, on Rand’s view, values are neither intrinsic (simply embedded in certain things in the external world) nor subjective (inventions projected

¹³ Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Penguin, 1991), p. xiv.

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by consciousness), but objective. I will also explain why, when Rand speaks of *life* as the standard of value, we must understand her to be speaking of a flourishing life rather than a minimal, bare bones subsistence. (Because happiness must also be understood by reference to such a flourishing life, in the remainder of this Introduction, I will refer to the aim of ethics and of value-pursuit interchangeably as life, flourishing, and happiness.)

Rand's account, we will see, is egoistic. Indeed, the case for ethics and the case for egoism are fundamentally one and the same. The propriety of pursuing self-interest arises from understanding that human beings need to identify and follow a particular code of action if they are to survive. Because living depends on life-sustaining action, a person must act in ways that will advance his life. Since the kind of egoism that Rand advocates is grounded in this recognition of man's need for objective values, it differs significantly from more familiar versions. Rand rejects hedonism and contends that an egoist must abide by rational principles, as these offer the only effective means of advancing his interest, long range. Principles' authority stems entirely from their egoistic practicality. Rand also rejects the dog-eat-dog image of an egoist as out to unjustly exploit others. I will explain her reasons for disputing the widely accepted premise beneath that image, the notion that individuals' interests conflict, by indicating the shallow conceptions of interest and the ignoring of context that such claims typically depend on.

The heart of the book consists in an elaboration of seven major virtues. Chapter 3 examines what Rand regards as the principal, overarching virtue, rationality. I begin by clarifying Rand's understanding of what a virtue is, given that some of her formulations may sound at odds with contemporary accounts. In the end, her conception is compatible with the prevalent characterization of virtue as a disposition to act or feel in certain ways, though Rand especially emphasizes virtues as types of action that reflect recognition of facts about the most basic demands of life.

Rationality is the acceptance of reason as one's only source of knowledge and fundamental guide to action. I will explain Rand's view of what reason is to show how a rational person is guided exclusively by the evidence of his senses and by logical inferences from that evidence. Rationality consists in a deliberate policy of grounding one's thinking in the way things are, as best as one can discern through the exercise of his perceptual and conceptual capacities. Essentially, rationality consists of fidelity to facts.

We can appreciate why rationality is a moral virtue by reminding ourselves of the reason for having morality and for considering anything

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a moral virtue: survival. Rationality is the fundamental means by which human beings can maintain and advance our lives. Our more specific needs can be satisfied only through what is, at root, rational action (occasional flukes aside). Because things in external reality are what they are independently of an individual's thoughts or wishes about them, because we control whether and how we use our minds, and because, as fallible beings, our beliefs are not automatically correct, human beings must exert a concerted effort to base the thinking that guides our actions on the way the world actually is. This is what rationality enables us to do.

The principal requirement of exercising this virtue is at once simple and formidable: when considering any issue, a rational person must maintain a clear focus on the relevant facts. Rationality does not demand heights of intelligence so much as a conscientious refusal to evade any thoughts, knowledge, or questions that occur to a person on the issue in question. Rationality demands seeking to know the nature of the world that a person must navigate so that he can navigate effectively; consequently, it demands trying to learn, to understand, and to integrate new information with preexisting knowledge. Although an insistence on rationality does not banish emotions from our lives, it does mean that a person must forswear emotionalism, the practice of surrendering the reins of one's judgment to one's feelings.

Chapter 4 takes up honesty, which is perhaps the most obvious virtue derivative from rationality.¹⁴ Rand understands honesty as the refusal to fake reality. As such, honesty does not primarily concern how a person interacts with others, but how he deals with *everything* he encounters. The honest person does not pretend that things are other than they are, either to others or to himself.

The case for honesty overlaps considerably with the case for rationality. Given the independence of existents of individuals' thoughts or wishes about them, faking things is fruitless. Because misrepresenting facts does

¹⁴ Although honesty and the other virtues are all derivative from rationality, Rand does not regard any particular order of these as logically mandatory. Peikoff, p. 251. I do not follow either the sequence in Rand's essay "The Objectivist Ethics," *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet/Penguin, 1964), pp. 13–39 or in Galt's Speech in *Atlas Shrugged*. It is worth noting, however, that while life is the goal which all virtues serve, Rand identifies three "cardinal values" – reason, purpose, self-esteem – as the somewhat less abstract ends of virtue, and she links these values with the particular virtues of (respectively) rationality, productiveness, and pride. (She describes these values as, together, "the means to and the realization of one's ultimate value, one's own life." "The Objectivist Ethics," p. 27.) I am not devoting special attention to these values as a group, although I will discuss purpose and self-esteem in the chapters on productiveness and pride.

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not change those facts, a person's flourishing depends on his respecting reality, which is what honesty advises. Fooling other people is not ultimately advantageous because it does not alter the facts about which one fools them. Further, faking values is no more viable than faking facts, we will see, since values are a type of facts. Pretending that something stands in a constructive relationship to one's life does not make it stand in such a constructive relationship.

Far from being the puppeteer who manipulates others, a liar makes himself subservient to other people's standards and expectations. Insofar as he tries to conceal his deception, he must coin a potentially endless stream of additional falsehoods to prop up the original lie. In doing so and then premising his actions on others' image of him rather than on the relevant facts of reality, he drifts further from a rational course, taking an increasing number of nonreality-based actions. This can only work against his objective well-being. By contrasting Rand's reasoning with the three most commonly offered rationales for honesty, we will appreciate the nonsocial roots of Rand's argument and its entirely egoistic character.

Because honesty concerns a person's basic mode of dealing with reality, the practical demands of honesty involve much more than refraining from deceiving other people. In particular, I will focus on honesty's requirements that a person renounce self-deception, develop an active mind, and act on his knowledge. I will also consider the status of honesty in two kinds of specialized circumstances: when responding to another person's use of force and when seeking to spare another person's feelings (commonly considered "white lies"), finding that misleading a person can be justified in the former cases but not in the latter.

Chapter 5 examines the virtue of independence, which concerns a person's basic method of sustaining himself, intellectually as well as materially. Independence, as Rand understands it, consists in setting one's primary orientation to reality rather than to other people. The independent person does not defer to others' beliefs or attitudes to chart his course and he does not rely on others' production to satisfy his material needs. In contrast to the parasite, the independent person accepts full responsibility for making his way in the world by forming his own judgments, adopting ends that he deems valuable, and acting to achieve those ends. He does not treat other people as his highest master, ultimate standard, or basic means of fulfilling his life's requirements.

The need for independence is implicit in the need for rationality. Because reason is human beings' basic means of survival and because the exercise of reason is inherently a do-it-yourself enterprise, independence

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is a precondition of rational judgment and thus vital to human life. One person cannot reason for another. Whatever the direction offered by others, a person must make up his own mind about whether to accept it. If a person were alone on a deserted island, his need to act to sustain himself and to think for himself, in order to figure out how to do that, would be plain. While our immersion in society may obscure this fact, it does not alter it. For if we imagined other people, brimming with advice, later joining the originally solitary islander, he would still have to assess their recommendations to determine whether following any of them could actually advance his life. In order to reap the substantial objective values that human beings can offer one another, in other words, individuals must exercise first-handed judgment of reality.

In elaborating on the demands of this virtue, we will see how the independent person must rely on reason (as opposed to feeling) in thinking for himself. Rand is not endorsing the value of anything that a given person thinks or desires simply because *he* thinks or desires it. Moreover, since thought and knowledge are not ends in themselves, independence further requires that a person act on his judgment and live by the work of his own mind. This does not entail that a person should be anti-social or spurn the benefits offered by other people, but it does entail that genuinely profitable relationships between individuals rely on the independence of each party. We will also see how assertions of modern man's "interdependence" typically equivocate over the meaning of dependence.

In Chapter 6, we return to a more familiar virtue: justice. Rand understands justice to consist in judging other persons objectively and treating them accordingly by giving them what they deserve (which is essentially the account that has been historically dominant: giving each person his due). Rand describes the just person's characteristic posture as that of a trader who neither seeks nor gives the unearned. It is important to appreciate, however, that the rationale for being just is, here again, thoroughly egoistic. Contrary to widespread assumptions, being just is not a sacrifice, but is in an agent's long-term interest. The reason to exercise justice is the impact that other people stand to exert on one's life. Because others can affect one's values in countless ways large and small, for good or for ill, a rational egoist has every reason to evaluate other people objectively and to treat them accordingly. Faking other individuals' actions or character neither alters their actions or character nor their potential effects on a person's life. Justice is thus a vital means of protecting and promoting one's values.