

Allan Gotthelf and James Lennox, eds.

Metaethics, Egoism and Virtue: Studies in Ayn Rand's Normative Theory.

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A tension has existed in the academic reception of Ayn Rand's Objectivism since its early presentation in theoretical form after her *Atlas Shrugged*, in 1957. She was not an 'analytic' philosopher, and disputed the approach taken to answering fundamental questions by analytic philosophers. (See particularly her *Virtue of Selfishness* or *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* on this topic.) Many of her ideas were first given in fiction, rather than *via* the standard academic journals or publishers. Nevertheless her ideas have inspired millions of readers, and even become a part of the (North American) cultural mainstream, insofar as she has particularly influenced some of the libertarian aspects of political life since the 1980's. The authors collected in Allan Gotthelf and James Lennox's book plainly show how Rand's work is relevant both to the analytic and existentialist traditions in moral philosophy, and is worthy of study for the issues it addresses within the Objectivist framework. The collection is divided into four sections, the first on life as the basic value and criterion of ethics, the second on Objectivism in relation to the analytic tradition and *eudaimonism*, the third on Rand's relation to Nietzsche and the issue of sacrifice, and finally on the work of Tara Smith, whose *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics* is a committed clarification of Rand's ideas.

Darryl Wright's lead article, 'Reasoning about Ends', concerns Rand's first principle that 'life is the standard of value', i.e., that the continued rational life by the individual agent is the criterion by which one decides values and virtues. He explores the views of Hume, Kant, Aristotle, plus sympathetic Objectivist scholars, to explain the stance that life has objective, metaphysical (rather than intrinsic) value. He also addresses the question how to place the notion of obligation, which is based on our choices and is dependent on life-affirming objective criteria as delimited through the virtues (particularly rationality, independence, integrity and pride). Allan Gotthelf's essay in the same section clarifies how Rand's theory of life as the criterion of value is not a version of simple consequentialism, but is grounded in a more fundamental metaphysical issue: Gotthelf emphasizes that the choice of life as the fundamental value is neither optional nor arbitrary, but is based on the objective fact of human life as conditional, giving us a 'stake' (41) in having life-promoting values.

Irfan Khawaja's contribution, 'The Foundations of Ethics: Objectivism and Analytic Philosophy', defends the attempt 'to identify the [Objectivist] theory's overarching justificatory structure in such a way as to show (without doing violence to its claims or watering them down) how it is in competition with analytic philosophy on problems that analytic philosophers can recognize as their own' (50). Reading this piece is time well spent for ethicists in the analytic tradition seeking to understand better the Objectivist view, or Objectivists seeking a better understanding of how the theory stands

in relation to the main work done by analytic philosophers in the last century. Rand did not comment directly on much of the work done by her analytic contemporaries, something which scholars might find regrettable. Khawaja's focus on metaethical foundationalism contains sections on Aristotle, Kant, Rawls, Nozick, plus intuitionism, moral epistemology, and particularly on the question 'what's at the basis of our moral considerations?', and on areas for further research (which Rand acknowledged) (72). Paul Bloomfield's response 'Egoism and Eudaimonism' attempts to resolve some of the issues between Khawaja's view of the Objectivist position and those offered in the history of philosophy, questioning whether Khawaja's view is too tight a merging between metaethics and normative ethics. Bloomfield sees Rand as working on a 'shared, rough idea of "the good life"' (75), and he draws attention to many characters in the history of philosophy (including recent contemporaries) to show that her egoism is not so much in contrast to the mainstream.

The third section, 'Egoism and Virtue in Nietzsche and Rand', starts with Christine Swanton's article to explain the sense in which Rand defends her egoism or could allow for other-regarding behavior. Swanton refers to it as ethical 'altruism'—see below—which Rand, to my recollection, would not approve, because altruism means fundamentally that the primary beneficiary of one's actions had to be others; she never said don't do things for others and she set her basic standard as mutual benefit when others' benefits are taken into account. Swanton does mention this factor in her E2 (Ethical Egoism) Thesis (88), and that benefiting others must be *via* the egoist virtues. Darryl Wright's response to this is to clarify that the context has to be set within what Rand calls a 'hierarchy of values' (109) and that Swanton must sort out the ambiguity about altruism, i.e., between virtuous and non-virtuous altruism, and do so in a way that makes 'altruism' a term which Rand should approve.

In the final section of the book, Tara Smith responds to comments about her monographs on the Objectivist ethics, most recently *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist* (CUP 2006; cf. review by Stephen Hicks, *Philosophy in Review* 27, no. 5 [October 2007]: 377-9). The first piece by Helen Cullyer concerns the view that 'Smith's version of Rand's ethics actually suggests two quite different and incompatible models of egoism that I [Cullyer] term the "rational maximize" model and the "rational non-maximizer" model' (113). One is stuck at the 'first order' egoist level according to the first model, all things being for the general betterment of the self, but there can be cases like friendship by which one becomes less better off than one's collaborators, even though it is virtuous. (One is struck by how utilitarian sounding the first model is.) Smith responds to Cullyer that one has to keep in mind that self-interest has priority, so that 'The reason I care about the package "my friend and myself" is that I care about my well being' (127). Key is not to surrender one's freedom, the basic condition of values (129).

Christine Swanton contributes another essay here on Smith's work, concerning Objectivism's relation to virtue ethics and promoting 'a conception of the virtuous altruist, for not all altruism is virtuous' (131) Her 'virtuous altruism' (VA) is the view that

[o]ne should benefit another if and only if that is virtuous (that is, instantiates a virtue such as generosity, kindness, friendship, parental virtue, and so forth), or is at least compatible with virtue. (136)

According to Swanton, Smith's (and Rand's) versions of Objectivism lack the 'resources' (140) for morally appropriate and 'virtuous' empathy. Smith responds, consistent with Rand's writings, that 'Rand is not embracing any form of altruism' (143). Smith defends the view that the virtues are necessary for values, and demands clarification on the assumption that a general empathy is morally required. (e.g. Swanton had approvingly appealed to theorists like Kant, who Rand challenged and famously despised.)

Lester Hunt explores the role of 'inclination' in relation to Smith's view of Rand's virtue ethics: arguing that for Smith virtues are not 'traits of character' (151), he appeals to Rand's fiction—particularly the character of Howard Roark from *The Fountainhead*—and comments about it that in his view 'the idea behind an ethics of virtue is that ethical value resides not merely in what particular things you do but also in what sort of person you are' (156). Smith's response is to argue that Rand need not be classified as a 'virtue ethicist', since it shouldn't be assumed that 'the virtues dictate values' (159). Rand emphasized the primacy of life as a value (see above) and Smith points out that '[t]he morality of a person's character and the morality of his action on a particular occasion are not necessarily the same' (161), appealing to the fact that portrayals from Rand's fiction show that even some moral heroes might not be the same as her best portrayals of how we ought to live; their actions have more significance. Assessing character is 'derivative' of assessing actions, since action promotes the prerequisite *value* of life (163).

This edited collection by Gotthelf and Lennox is a very worthwhile read. Whether one is sympathetic or not to Rand's Objectivism, the authors collected here explain and exemplify how Objectivism significantly engages with issues in the ethical theories of analytic and existential philosophers, and how the subtleties of Rand's work are worthy of study and explanation. Nevertheless, the format of articles followed by 'replies'/'elaborations' is helpful for showing how a reader sympathetic to Rand's ideas might integrate them better with their studies in philosophy generally. The collection is the result of presentations made for the Ayn Rand Society affiliated with the APA; Gotthelf and Lennox are at the helm of that group and are otherwise very distinguished scholars in their own right, as are the other contributors to the volume. Given that the book is conference proceedings, it is not clearly for a novice reader: it deals with penetrating contemporary issues in ethical theory, presupposes familiarity with Rand's own texts, and is enhanced by an awareness of the history of ethical theory. Its bibliography is also useful for Objectivist scholars interested in references made to Rand's work, or for analytic scholars for the same reason, and to show Objectivism's relevance to other philosophy.

The book is to be the inaugurator of a series devoted to Rand on major themes in the philosophical lexicon. The project should be applauded: there's a lot more viable work and comparable issues in her systematic philosophy than has been academically

recognized. And with the popularity of Rand's ideas, the book is certainly recommended for ethicists, upper year scholarly classes and academic libraries.

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