

Ayn Rand – THE VIRTUE OF SELFISHNESS

**THE
VIRTUE
OF
SELFISHNESS**

A New Concept of Egoism

by Ayn Rand

With Additional Articles
by Nathaniel Branden

A SIGNET BOOK

Ayn Rand – THE VIRTUE OF SELFISHNESS

SIGNET

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1. The Objectivist Ethics

by Ayn Rand

Since I am to speak on the Objectivist Ethics, I shall begin by quoting its best representative—John Galt, in *Atlas Shrugged*:

“Through centuries of scourges and disasters, brought about by your code of morality, you have cried that your code had been broken, that the scourges were punishment for breaking it, that men were too weak and too selfish to spill all the blood it required. You damned man, you damned existence, you damned this earth, but never dared to question your code. ... You went on crying that your code was noble, but human nature was not good enough to practice it. And no one rose to ask the question: Good?—by what standard?”

“You wanted to know John Galt’s identity. I am the man who has asked that question.

“Yes, this *is* an age of moral crisis. ... Your moral code has reached its climax, the blind alley at the end of its course. And if you wish to go on living, what you now need is not to *return* to morality ... but to *discover* it.”¹

What is morality, or ethics? It is a code of values to guide man’s choices and actions—the choices and actions that determine the purpose and the course of his life. Ethics, as a science, deals with discovering and defining such a code.

The first question that has to be answered, as a precondition of any attempt to define, to judge or to accept any specific system of ethics, is: *Why* does man need a code of values?

Let me stress this. The first question is not: What particular code of values should man accept? The first question is: Does man need values at all—and why?

Is the concept of *value*, of “good or evil” an arbitrary human invention, unrelated to, underived from and unsupported by any facts of reality—or is it based on a *metaphysical* fact, on an unalterable condition of man’s existence? (I use the word “metaphysical” to mean: that which pertains to reality, to the nature of things, to existence.) Does an arbitrary human convention, a mere custom, decree that man must guide his actions by a set of principles—or is there a fact of reality that demands it? Is ethics the

¹ Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, New York: Random House, 1957; New American Library, 1959.
Paper delivered by Ayn Rand at the University of Wisconsin Symposium on “Ethics in Our Time” in Madison, Wisconsin, on February 9, 1961.

province of *whims*: of personal emotions, social edicts and mystic revelations—or is it the province of *reason*? Is ethics a subjective luxury—or an *objective* necessity?

In the sorry record of the history of mankind’s ethics—with a few rare, and unsuccessful, exceptions—moralists have regarded ethics as the province of whims, that is: of the irrational. Some of them did so explicitly, by intention—others implicitly, by default. A “whim” is a desire experienced by a person who does not know and does not care to discover its cause.

No philosopher has given a rational, objectively demonstrable, scientific answer to the question of *why* man needs a code of values. So long as that question remained unanswered, no rational, scientific, *objective* code of ethics could be discovered or defined. The greatest of all philosophers, Aristotle, did not regard ethics as an exact science; he based his ethical system on observations of what the noble and wise men of his time chose to do, leaving unanswered the questions of: *why* they chose to do it and *why* he evaluated them as noble and wise.

Most philosophers took the existence of ethics for granted, as the given, as a historical fact, and were not concerned with discovering its metaphysical cause or objective validation. Many of them attempted to break the traditional monopoly of mysticism in the field of ethics and, allegedly, to define a rational, scientific, nonreligious morality. But their attempts consisted of trying to justify them on *social* grounds, merely substituting *society* for *God*.

The avowed mystics held the arbitrary, unaccountable “will of God” as the standard of the good and as the validation of their ethics. The neomystics replaced it with “the good of society,” thus collapsing into the circularity of a definition such as “the standard of the good is that which is good for society.” This meant, in logic—and, today, in worldwide practice—that “society” stands above any principles of ethics, since *it* is the source, standard and criterion of ethics, since “the good” is whatever *it* wills, whatever *it* happens to assert as its own welfare and pleasure. This meant that “society” may do anything it pleases, since “the good” is whatever it chooses to do *because* it chooses to do it. And—since there is no such entity as “society,” since society is only a number of individual men—this meant that *some* men (the majority or any gang that claims to be its spokesman) are ethically entitled to pursue any whims (or any atrocities) they desire to pursue, while *other* men are ethically obliged to spend their lives in the service of that gang’s desires.

This could hardly be called rational, yet most philosophers have now decided to declare that reason has failed, that ethics is outside the power of reason, that no rational ethics can ever be defined, and that in the field of ethics—in the choice of his values, of his actions, of his pursuits, of his life’s goals—man must be guided by something other than reason. By what? Faith—instinct—intuition—revelation—feeling—taste—urge—wish—*whim*. Today, as in the past, most philosophers agree that the ultimate standard of ethics is *whim* (they call it “arbitrary postulate” or “subjective choice” or “emotional commitment”)—and the battle is only over the question of *whose* whim: one’s own or society’s or the dictator’s or God’s. Whatever else they may disagree about, today’s moralists agree that ethics is a *subjective* issue and that the three things barred from its field are: reason—mind—reality.

If you wonder why the world is now collapsing to a lower and ever lower rung of hell, *this* is the reason.

If you want to save civilization, it is *this* premise of modern ethics—and of all ethical history—that you must challenge.

To challenge the basic premise of any discipline, one must begin at the beginning. In ethics, one must begin by asking: What are *values*? Why does man need them?

“Value” is that which one acts to gain and/or keep. The concept “value” is not a primary; it presupposes an answer to the question: of value to *whom* and for *what*? It presupposes an entity capable of acting to achieve a goal in the face of an alternative. Where no alternative exists, no goals and no values are possible.

I quote from Galt’s speech: “There is only one fundamental alternative in the universe: existence or nonexistence—and it pertains to a single class of entities: to living organisms. The existence of inanimate matter is unconditional, the existence of life is not: it depends on a specific course of action. Matter is indestructible, it changes its forms, but it cannot cease to exist. It is only a living organism that faces a constant alternative: the issue of life or death. Life is a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action. If an organism fails in that action, it dies; its chemical elements remain, but its life goes out of existence. It is only the concept of ‘Life’ that makes the concept of ‘Value’ possible. It is only to a living entity that things can be good or evil.”

To make this point fully clear, try to imagine an immortal, indestructible robot, an entity which moves and acts, but which cannot be affected by anything, which cannot be changed in any respect, which cannot be damaged, injured or destroyed. Such an entity would not be able to have any

values; it would have nothing to gain or to lose; it could not regard anything as *for* or *against* it, as serving or threatening its welfare, as fulfilling or frustrating its interests. It could have no interests and no goals.

Only a *living* entity can have goals or can originate them. And it is only a living organism that has the capacity for self-generated, goal-directed action. On the *physical* level, the functions of all living organisms, from the simplest to the most complex—from the nutritive function in the single cell of an amoeba to the blood circulation in the body of a man—are actions generated by the organism itself and directed to a single goal: the maintenance of the organism's *life*.²

An organism's life depends on two factors: the material or fuel which it needs from the outside, from its physical background, and the action of its own body, the action of using that fuel *properly*. What standard determines what is *proper* in this context? The standard is the organism's life, or: that which is required for the organism's survival.

No choice is open to an organism in this issue: that which is required for its survival is determined by its *nature*, by the kind of entity it *is*. Many variations, many forms of adaptation to its background are possible to an organism, including the possibility of existing for a while in a crippled, disabled or diseased condition, but the fundamental alternative of its existence remains the same: if an organism fails in the basic functions required by its nature—if an amoeba's protoplasm stops assimilating food, or if a man's heart stops beating—the organism dies. In a fundamental sense, stillness is the antithesis of life. Life can be kept in existence only by a constant process of self-sustaining action. The goal of that action, the ultimate *value* which, to be kept, must be gained through its every moment, is the organism's *life*.

An *ultimate* value is that final goal or end to which all lesser goals are the means—and it sets the standard by which all lesser goals are *evaluated*. An organism's life is its *standard of value*: that which furthers its life is the *good*, that which threatens it is the *evil*.

Without an ultimate goal or end, there can be no lesser goals or means: a series of means going off into an infinite progression toward a nonexistent end is a metaphysical and epistemological impossibility. It is only an ultimate goal, an *end in itself*, that makes the existence of values possible.

² When applied to physical phenomena, such as the automatic functions of an organism, the term "goal-directed" is not to be taken to mean "purposive" (a concept applicable only to the actions of a consciousness) and is not to imply the existence of any teleological principle operating in insentient nature. I use the term "goal-directed," in this context, to designate the fact that the automatic functions of living organisms are actions whose nature is such that they *result* in the preservation of an organism's life.

Metaphysically, *life* is the only phenomenon that is an end in itself: a value gained and kept by a constant process of action. Epistemologically, the concept of “value” is genetically dependent upon and derived from the antecedent concept of “life.” To speak of “value” as apart from “life” is worse than a contradiction in terms. “It is only the concept of ‘Life’ that makes the concept of ‘Value’ possible.”

In answer to those philosophers who claim that no relation can be established between ultimate ends or values and the facts of reality, let me stress that the fact that living entities exist and function necessitates the existence of values and of an ultimate value which for any given living entity is its own life. Thus the validation of value judgments is to be achieved by reference to the facts of reality. The fact that a living entity *is*, determines what it *ought* to do. So much for the issue of the relation between “*is*” and “*ought*.”

Now in what manner does a human being discover the concept of “*value*”? By what means does he first become aware of the issue of “*good or evil*” in its simplest form? By means of the physical sensations of *pleasure* or *pain*. Just as sensations are the first step of the development of a human consciousness in the realm of *cognition*, so they are its first step in the realm of *evaluation*.

The capacity to experience pleasure or pain is innate in a man’s body; it is part of his *nature*, part of the kind of entity he *is*. He has no choice about it, and he has no choice about the standard that determines what will make him experience the physical sensation of pleasure or of pain. What is that standard? *His life*.

The pleasure-pain mechanism in the body of man—and in the bodies of all the living organisms that possess the faculty of consciousness—serves as an automatic guardian of the organism’s life. The physical sensation of pleasure is a signal indicating that the organism is pursuing the *right* course of action. The physical sensation of pain is a warning signal of danger, indicating that the organism is pursuing the *wrong* course of action, that something is impairing the proper function of its body, which requires action to correct it. The best illustration of this can be seen in the rare, freak cases of children who are born without the capacity to experience physical pain; such children do not survive for long; they have no means of discovering what can injure them, no warning signals, and thus a minor cut can develop into a deadly infection, or a major illness can remain undetected until it is too late to fight it.

Consciousness—for those living organisms which possess it—is the basic means of survival.

The simpler organisms, such as plants, can survive by means of their automatic physical functions. The higher organisms, such as animals and man, cannot: their needs are more complex and the range of their actions is wider. The physical functions of their bodies can perform automatically only the task of using fuel, but cannot *obtain* that fuel. To obtain it, the higher organisms need the faculty of consciousness. A plant can obtain its food from the soil in which it grows. An animal has to hunt for it. Man has to produce it.

A plant has no choice of action; the goals it pursues are automatic and innate, determined by its nature. Nourishment, water, sunlight are the values its nature has set it to seek. Its life is the standard of value directing its actions. There are alternatives in the conditions it encounters in its physical background—such as heat or frost, drought or flood—and there are certain actions which it is able to perform to combat adverse conditions, such as the ability of some plants to grow and crawl from under a rock to reach the sunlight. But whatever the conditions, there is no alternative in a plant's function: it acts automatically to further its life, it cannot act for its own destruction.

The range of actions required for the survival of the higher organisms is wider: it is proportionate to the range of their *consciousness*. The lower of the conscious species possess only the faculty of *sensation*, which is sufficient to direct their actions and provide for their needs. A sensation is produced by the automatic reaction of a sense organ to a stimulus from the outside world; it lasts for the duration of the immediate moment, as long as the stimulus lasts and no longer. Sensations are an automatic response, an automatic form of knowledge, which a consciousness can neither seek nor evade. An organism that possesses only the faculty of sensation is guided by the pleasure-pain mechanism of its body, that is: by an automatic knowledge and an automatic code of values. Its life is the standard of value directing its actions. Within the range of action possible to it, it acts automatically to further its life and cannot act for its own destruction.

The higher organisms possess a much more potent form of consciousness: they possess the faculty of *retaining* sensations, which is the faculty of *perception*. A “perception” is a group of sensations automatically retained and integrated by the brain of a living organism, which gives it the ability to be aware, not of single stimuli, but of *entities*, of things. An animal is guided, not merely by immediate sensations, but by *percepts*. Its actions are not single, discrete responses to single, separate stimuli, but are directed by an integrated awareness of the *perceptual* reality confronting it. It is able to grasp the perceptual concretes immediately present and it is able to form

automatic perceptual associations, but it can go no further. It is able to learn certain skills to deal with specific situations, such as hunting or hiding, which the parents of the higher animals teach their young. But an animal has no choice in the knowledge and the skills that it acquires; it can only repeat them generation after generation. And an animal has no choice in the standard of value directing its actions: its senses provide it with an *automatic* code of values, an automatic knowledge of what is good for it or evil, what benefits or endangers its life. An animal has no power to extend its knowledge or to evade it. In situations for which its knowledge is inadequate, it perishes—as, for instance, an animal that stands paralyzed on the track of a railroad in the path of a speeding train. But so long as it lives, an animal acts on its knowledge, with automatic safety and no power of choice: it cannot suspend its own consciousness—it cannot choose *not* to perceive—it cannot evade its own perceptions—it cannot ignore its own good, it cannot decide to choose the evil and act as its own destroyer.

Man has no automatic code of survival. He has no automatic course of action, no automatic set of values. His senses do not tell him automatically what is good for him or evil, what will benefit his life or endanger it, what goals he should pursue and what means will achieve them, what *values* his life depends on, what course of action it requires. His own consciousness has to discover the answers to all these questions—but his consciousness will not function *automatically*. Man, the highest living species on this earth—the being whose consciousness has a limitless capacity for gaining knowledge—man is the only living entity born without any guarantee of *remaining* conscious at all. Man’s particular distinction from all other living species is the fact that *his* consciousness is *volitional*.

Just as the automatic values directing the functions of a plant’s body are sufficient for its survival, but are not sufficient for an animal’s—so the automatic values provided by the sensory-perceptual mechanism of its consciousness are sufficient to guide an animal, but are not sufficient for man. Man’s actions and survival require the guidance of *conceptual* values derived from *conceptual* knowledge. But *conceptual* knowledge cannot be acquired *automatically*.

A “*concept*” is a mental integration of two or more perceptual concretes, which are isolated by a process of *abstraction* and united by means of a specific definition. Every word of man’s language, with the exception of proper names, denotes a *concept*, an abstraction that stands for an unlimited number of concretes of a specific kind. It is by organizing his perceptual material into concepts, and his concepts into wider and still wider concepts that man is able to grasp and retain, to identify and integrate an unlimited

amount of knowledge, a knowledge extending beyond the immediate perceptions of any given, immediate moment. Man's sense organs function automatically; man's brain integrates his sense data into percepts automatically; but the process of integrating percepts into concepts—the process of abstraction and of concept-formation—is *not* automatic.

The process of concept-formation does not consist merely of grasping a few simple abstractions, such as “chair,” “table,” “hot,” “cold,” and of learning to speak. It consists of a method of using one's consciousness, best designated by the term “conceptualizing.” It is not a passive state of registering random impressions. It is an actively sustained process of identifying one's impressions in conceptual terms, of integrating every event and every observation into a conceptual context, of grasping relationships, differences, similarities in one's perceptual material and of abstracting them into new concepts, of drawing inferences, of making deductions, of reaching conclusions, of asking new questions and discovering new answers and expanding one's knowledge into an ever-growing sum. The faculty that directs this process, the faculty that works by means of concepts, is: *reason*. The process is *thinking*.

Reason is the faculty that identifies and integrates the material provided by man's senses. It is a faculty that man has to exercise *by choice*. Thinking is not an automatic function. In any hour and issue of his life, man is free to think or to evade that effort. Thinking requires a state of full, focused awareness. The act of focusing one's consciousness is volitional. Man can focus his mind to a full, active, purposefully directed awareness of reality—or he can unfocus it and let himself drift in a semiconscious daze, merely reacting to any chance stimulus of the immediate moment, at the mercy of his undirected sensory-perceptual mechanism and of any random, associational connections it might happen to make.

When man unfocuses his mind, he may be said to be conscious in a subhuman sense of the word, since he experiences sensations and perceptions. But in the sense of the word applicable to man—in the sense of a consciousness which is aware of reality and able to deal with it, a consciousness able to direct the actions and provide for the survival of a human being—an unfocused mind is *not* conscious.

Psychologically, the choice “to think or not” is the choice “to focus or not.” Existentially, the choice “to focus or not” is the choice “to be conscious or not.” Metaphysically, the choice “to be conscious or not” is the choice of life or death.

Consciousness—for those living organisms which possess it—is the basic means of survival. For man, the basic means of survival is *reason*. Man

cannot survive, as animals do, by the guidance of mere percepts. A sensation of hunger will tell him that he needs food (if he has learned to identify it as “hunger”), but it will not tell him how to obtain his food and it will not tell him what food is good for him or poisonous. He cannot provide for his simplest physical needs without a process of thought. He needs a process of thought to discover how to plant and grow his food or how to make weapons for hunting. His percepts might lead him to a cave, if one is available—but to build the simplest shelter, he needs a process of thought. No percepts and no “instincts” will tell him how to light a fire, how to weave cloth, how to forge tools, how to make a wheel, how to make an airplane, how to perform an appendectomy, how to produce an electric light bulb or an electronic tube or a cyclotron or a box of matches. Yet his life depends on such knowledge—and only a volitional act of his consciousness, a process of thought, can provide it.

But man’s responsibility goes still further: a process of thought is not automatic nor “instinctive” nor involuntary—nor *infallible*. Man has to initiate it, to sustain it and to bear responsibility for its results. He has to discover how to tell what is true or false and how to correct his own errors; he has to discover how to validate his concepts, his conclusions, his knowledge; he has to discover the rules of thought, *the laws of logic*, to direct his thinking. Nature gives him no automatic guarantee of the efficacy of his mental effort.

Nothing is given to man on earth except a potential and the material on which to actualize it. The potential is a superlative machine: his consciousness; but it is a machine without a spark plug, a machine of which his own will has to be the spark plug, the self-starter and the driver; *he* has to discover how to use it and *he* has to keep it in constant action. The material is the whole of the universe, with no limits set to the knowledge he can acquire and to the enjoyment of life he can achieve. But everything he needs or desires has to be learned, discovered and produced by *him*—by his own choice, by his own effort, by his own mind.

A being who does not know automatically what is true or false, cannot know automatically what is right or wrong, what is good for him or evil. Yet he needs that knowledge in order to live. He is not exempt from the laws of reality, he is a specific organism of a specific nature that requires specific actions to sustain his life. He cannot achieve his survival by arbitrary means nor by random motions nor by blind urges nor by chance nor by whim. That which his survival requires is set by his nature and is not open to his choice. What *is* open to his choice is only whether he will discover it or not, whether he will choose the right goals and *values* or not. He is free to make the

wrong choice, but not free to succeed with it. He is free to evade reality, he is free to unfocus his mind and stumble blindly down any road he pleases, but not free to avoid the abyss he refuses to see. Knowledge, for any conscious organism, is the means of survival; to a living consciousness, every “*is*” implies an “*ought*.” Man is free to choose not to be conscious, but not free to escape the penalty of unconsciousness: destruction. Man is the only living species that has the power to act as his own destroyer—and that is the way he has acted through most of his history.

What, then, are the right goals for man to pursue? What are the values his survival requires? That is the question to be answered by the science of *ethics*. And *this*, ladies and gentlemen, is why man needs a code of ethics.

Now you can assess the meaning of the doctrines which tell you that ethics is the province of the irrational, that reason cannot guide man’s life, that his goals and values should be chosen by vote or by whim—that ethics has nothing to do with reality, with existence, with one’s practical actions and concerns—or that the goal of ethics is beyond the grave, that the dead need ethics, not the living.

Ethics is *not* a mystic fantasy—nor a social convention—nor a dispensable, subjective luxury, to be switched or discarded in any emergency. Ethics is an *objective, metaphysical necessity of man’s survival*—not by the grace of the supernatural nor of your neighbors nor of your whims, but by the grace of reality and the nature of life.

I quote from Galt’s speech: “Man has been called a rational being, but rationality is a matter of choice—and the alternative his nature offers him is: rational being or suicidal animal. Man has to be man—by choice; he has to hold his life as a value—by choice; he has to learn to sustain it—by choice; he has to discover the values it requires and practice his virtues—by choice. A code of values accepted by choice is a code of morality.”

The standard of value of the Objectivist ethics—the standard by which one judges what is good or evil—is *man’s life*, or: that which is required for man’s survival *qua* man.

Since reason is man’s basic means of survival, that which is proper to the life of a rational being is the good; that which negates, opposes or destroys it is the evil.

Since everything man needs has to be discovered by his own mind and produced by his own effort, the two essentials of the method of survival proper to a rational being are: thinking and productive work.

If some men do not choose to think, but survive by imitating and repeating, like trained animals, the routine of sounds and motions they learned from others, never making an effort to understand their own work, it

still remains true that their survival is made possible only by those who did choose to think and to discover the motions they are repeating. The survival of such mental parasites depends on blind chance; their unfocused minds are unable to know *whom* to imitate, *whose* motions it is safe to follow. *They* are the men who march into the abyss, trailing after any destroyer who promises them to assume the responsibility they evade: the responsibility of being conscious.

If some men attempt to survive by means of brute force or fraud, by looting, robbing, cheating or enslaving the men who produce, it still remains true that their survival is made possible only by their victims, only by the men who choose to think and to produce the goods which they, the looters, are seizing. Such looters are parasites incapable of survival, who exist by destroying those who *are* capable, those who are pursuing a course of action proper to man.

The men who attempt to survive, not by means of reason, but by means of force, are attempting to survive by the method of animals. But just as animals would not be able to survive by attempting the method of plants, by rejecting locomotion and waiting for the soil to feed them—so men cannot survive by attempting the method of animals, by rejecting reason and counting on productive *men* to serve as their prey. Such looters may achieve their goals for the range of a moment, at the price of destruction: the destruction of their victims and their own. As evidence, I offer you any criminal or any dictatorship.

Man cannot survive, like an animal, by acting on the range of the moment. An animal's life consists of a series of separate cycles, repeated over and over again, such as the cycle of breeding its young, or of storing food for the winter; an animal's consciousness cannot integrate its entire lifespan; it can carry just so far, then the animal has to begin the cycle all over again, with no connection to the past. *Man's* life is a continuous whole: for good or evil, every day, year and decade of his life holds the sum of all the days behind him. He can alter his choices, he is free to change the direction of his course, he is even free, in many cases, to atone for the consequences of his past—but he is not free to escape them, nor to live his life with impunity on the range of the moment, like an animal, a playboy or a thug. If he is to succeed at the task of survival, if his actions are not to be aimed at his own destruction, man has to choose his course, his goals, his values in the context and terms of a lifetime. No sensations, percepts, urges or “instincts” can do it; only a mind can.

Such is the meaning of the definition: that which is required for man's survival *qua* man. It does not mean a *momentary* or a merely *physical*

survival. It does not mean the momentary physical survival of a mindless brute, waiting for another brute to crush his skull. It does not mean the momentary physical survival of a crawling aggregate of muscles who is willing to accept any terms, obey any thug and surrender any values, for the sake of what is known as “survival at any price,” which may or may not last a week or a year. “Man’s survival *qua* man” means 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.

Man cannot survive as anything but man. He *can* abandon his means of survival, his mind, he *can* turn himself into a subhuman creature and he *can* turn his life into a brief span of agony—just as his body can exist for a while in the process of disintegration by disease. But he *cannot* succeed, as a subhuman, in achieving anything but the subhuman—as the ugly horror of the antirational periods of mankind’s history can demonstrate. Man has to be man by choice—and it is the task of ethics to teach him how to live like man.

The Objectivist ethics holds man’s life as the *standard* of value—and *his own life* as the ethical *purpose* of every individual man.

The difference between “standard” and “purpose” in this context is as follows: a “standard” is an abstract principle that serves as a measurement or gauge to guide a man’s choices in the achievement of a concrete, specific purpose. “That which is required for the survival of man *qua* man” is an abstract principle that applies to every individual man. The task of applying this principle to a concrete, specific purpose—the purpose of living a life proper to a rational being—belongs to every individual man, and the life he has to live is his own.

Man must choose his actions, values and goals by the standard of that which is proper to man—in order to achieve, maintain, fulfill and enjoy that ultimate value, that end in itself, which is his own life.

Value is that which one acts to gain and/or keep—*virtue* is the act by which one gains and/or keeps it. The three cardinal values of the Objectivist ethics—the three values which, together, are the means to and the realization of one’s ultimate value, one’s own life—are: Reason, Purpose, Self-Esteem, with their three corresponding virtues: Rationality, Productiveness, Pride.

Productive work is the central *purpose* of a rational man’s life, the central value that integrates and determines the hierarchy of all his other values. Reason is the source, the precondition of his productive work—pride is the result.

Rationality is man's basic virtue, the source of all his other virtues. Man's basic vice, the source of all his evils, is the act of unfocusing his mind, the suspension of his consciousness, which is not blindness, but the refusal to see, not ignorance, but the refusal to know. Irrationality is the rejection of man's means of survival and, therefore, a commitment to a course of blind destruction; that which is anti-mind, is anti-life.

The virtue of *Rationality* means the recognition and acceptance of reason as one's only source of knowledge, one's only judge of values and one's only guide to action. It means one's total commitment to a state of full, conscious awareness, to the maintenance of a full mental focus in all issues, in all choices, in all of one's waking hours. It means a commitment to the fullest perception of reality within one's power and to the constant, active expansion of one's perception, *i.e.*, of one's knowledge. It means a commitment to the reality of one's own existence, *i.e.*, to the principle that all of one's goals, values and actions take place in reality and, therefore, that one must never place any value or consideration whatsoever above one's perception of reality. It means a commitment to the principle that all of one's convictions, values, goals, desires and actions must be based on, derived from, chosen and validated by a process of thought—as precise and scrupulous a process of thought, directed by as ruthlessly strict an application of logic, as one's fullest capacity permits. It means one's acceptance of the responsibility of forming one's own judgments and of living by the work of one's own mind (which is the virtue of Independence). It means that one must never sacrifice one's convictions to the opinions or wishes of others (which is the virtue of Integrity)—that one must never attempt to fake reality in any manner (which is the virtue of Honesty)—that one must never seek or grant the unearned and undeserved, neither in matter nor in spirit (which is the virtue of Justice). It means that one must never desire effects without causes, and that one must never enact a cause without assuming full responsibility for its effects—that one must never act like a zombie, *i.e.*, without knowing one's own purposes and motives—that one must never make any decisions, form any convictions or seek any values out of context, *i.e.*, apart from or against the total, integrated sum of one's knowledge—and, above all, that one must never seek to get away with contradictions. It means the rejection of any form of *mysticism*, *i.e.*, any claim to some nonsensory, nonrational, nondefinable, supernatural source of knowledge. It means a commitment to reason, not in sporadic fits or on selected issues or in special emergencies, but as a permanent way of life.

The virtue of *Productiveness* is the recognition of the fact that productive work is the process by which man's mind sustains his life, the process that

sets man free of the necessity to adjust himself to his background, as all animals do, and gives him the power to adjust his background to himself. Productive work is the road of man's unlimited achievement and calls upon the highest attributes of his character: his creative ability, his ambitiousness, his self-assertiveness, his refusal to bear uncontested disasters, his dedication to the goal of reshaping the earth in the image of his values. "Productive work" does not mean the unfocused performance of the motions of some job. It means the consciously chosen pursuit of a productive career, in any line of rational endeavor, great or modest, on any level of ability. It is not the degree of a man's ability nor the scale of his work that is ethically relevant here, but the fullest and most purposeful use of his mind.

The virtue of *Pride* is the recognition of the fact "that as man must produce the physical values he needs to sustain his life, so he must acquire the values of character that make his life worth sustaining—that as man is a being of self-made wealth, so he is a being of self-made soul." (*Atlas Shrugged*.) The virtue of Pride can best be described by the term: "moral ambitiousness." It means that one must earn the right to hold oneself as one's own highest value by achieving one's own moral perfection—which one achieves by never accepting any code of irrational virtues impossible to practice and by never failing to practice the virtues one knows to be rational—by never accepting an unearned guilt and never earning any, or, if one *has* earned it, never leaving it uncorrected—by never resigning oneself passively to any flaws in one's character—by never placing any concern, wish, fear or mood of the moment above the reality of one's own self-esteem. And, above all, it means one's rejection of the role of a sacrificial animal, the rejection of any doctrine that preaches self-immolation as a moral virtue or duty.

The basic *social* principle of the Objectivist ethics is that just as life is an end in itself, so every living human being is an end in himself, not the means to the ends or the welfare of others—and, therefore, that man must live for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself. To live for his own sake means that *the achievement of his own happiness is man's highest moral purpose*.

In psychological terms, the issue of man's survival does not confront his consciousness as an issue of "life or death," but as an issue of "happiness or suffering." Happiness is the successful state of life, suffering is the warning signal of failure, of death. Just as the pleasure-pain mechanism of man's body is an automatic indicator of his body's welfare or injury, a barometer of its basic alternative, life or death—so the emotional mechanism of man's consciousness is geared to perform the same function, as a barometer that

registers the same alternative by means of two basic emotions: joy or suffering. Emotions are the automatic results of man's value judgments integrated by his subconscious; emotions are estimates of that which furthers man's values or threatens them, that which is *for* him or *against* him—lightning calculators giving him the sum of his profit or loss.

But while the standard of value operating the physical pleasure-pain mechanism of man's body is automatic and innate, determined by the nature of his body—the standard of value operating his emotional mechanism, is *not*. Since man has no automatic knowledge, he can have no automatic values; since he has no innate ideas, he can have no innate value judgments.

Man is born with an emotional mechanism, just as he is born with a cognitive mechanism; but, at birth, *both* are “tabula rasa.” It is man's cognitive faculty, his mind, that determines the *content* of both. Man's emotional mechanism is like an electronic computer, which his mind has to program—and the programming consists of the values his mind chooses.

But since the work of man's mind is not automatic, his values, like all his premises, are the product either of his thinking or of his evasions: man chooses his values by a conscious process of thought—or accepts them by default, by subconscious associations, on faith, on someone's authority, by some form of social osmosis or blind imitation. Emotions are produced by man's premises, held consciously or subconsciously, explicitly or implicitly.

Man has no choice about his capacity to feel that something is good for him or evil, but *what* he will consider good or evil, what will give him joy or pain, what he will love or hate, desire or fear, depends on his standard of value. If he chooses irrational values, he switches his emotional mechanism from the role of his guardian to the role of his destroyer. The irrational is the impossible; it is that which contradicts the facts of reality; facts cannot be altered by a wish, but they *can* destroy the wisher. If a man desires and pursues contradictions—if he wants to have his cake and eat it, too—he disintegrates his consciousness; he turns his inner life into a civil war of blind forces engaged in dark, incoherent, pointless, meaningless conflicts (which, incidentally, is the inner state of most people today).

Happiness is that state of consciousness which proceeds from the achievement of one's values. If a man values productive work, his happiness is the measure of his success in the service of his life. But if a man values destruction, like a sadist—or self-torture, like a masochist—or life beyond the grave, like a mystic—or mindless “kicks,” like the driver of a hotrod car—*his* alleged happiness is the measure of his success in the service of his own destruction. It must be added that the emotional state of all those

irrationalists cannot be properly designated as happiness or even as pleasure: it is merely a moment's *relief* from their chronic state of terror.

Neither life nor happiness can be achieved by the pursuit of irrational whims. Just as man is free to attempt to survive by any random means, as a parasite, a moocher or a looter, but not free to succeed at it beyond the range of the moment—so he is free to seek his happiness in any irrational fraud, any whim, any delusion, any mindless escape from reality, but not free to succeed at it beyond the range of the moment nor to escape the consequences.

I quote from Galt's speech: "Happiness is a state of non-contradictory joy—a joy without penalty or guilt, a joy that does not clash with any of your values and does not work for your own destruction. ... Happiness is possible only to a rational man, the man who desires nothing but rational goals, seeks nothing but rational values and finds his joy in nothing but rational actions."

The maintenance of life and the pursuit of happiness are not two separate issues. To hold one's own life as one's ultimate value, and one's own happiness as one's highest purpose are two aspects of the same achievement. Existentially, the activity of pursuing rational goals is the activity of maintaining one's life; psychologically, its result, reward and concomitant is an emotional state of happiness. It is by experiencing happiness that one lives one's life, in any hour, year or the whole of it. And when one experiences the kind of pure happiness that is an end in itself—the kind that makes one think: "*This* is worth living for"—what one is greeting and affirming in emotional terms is the metaphysical fact that *life* is an end in itself.

But the relationship of cause to effect cannot be reversed. It is only by accepting "man's life" as one's primary and by pursuing the rational values it requires that one can achieve happiness—*not* by taking "happiness" as some undefined, irreducible primary and then attempting to live by its guidance. If you achieve that which is the good by a rational standard of value, it will necessarily make you happy; but that which makes you happy, by some undefined emotional standard, is not necessarily the good. To take "whatever makes one happy" as a guide to action means: to be guided by nothing but one's emotional whims. Emotions are not tools of cognition; to be guided by whims—by desires whose source, nature and meaning one does not know—is to turn oneself into a blind robot, operated by unknowable demons (by one's stale evasions), a robot knocking its stagnant brains out against the walls of reality which it refuses to see.

This is the fallacy inherent in *hedonism*—in any variant of ethical hedonism, personal or social, individual or collective. “Happiness” can properly be the *purpose* of ethics, but *not* the *standard*. The task of ethics is to define man’s proper code of values and thus to give him the means of achieving happiness. To declare, as the ethical hedonists do, that “the proper value is whatever gives you pleasure” is to declare that “the proper value is whatever you happen to value”—which is an act of intellectual and philosophical abdication, an act which merely proclaims the futility of ethics and invites all men to play it deuces wild.

The philosophers who attempted to devise an allegedly rational code of ethics gave mankind nothing but a choice of whims: the “selfish” pursuit of one’s own whims (such as the ethics of Nietzsche)—or “selfless” service to the whims of others (such as the ethics of Bentham, Mill, Comte and of all social hedonists, whether they allowed man to include his own whims among the millions of others or advised him to turn himself into a totally selfless “shmoo” that seeks to be eaten by others).

When a “desire,” regardless of its nature or cause, is taken as an ethical primary, and the gratification of any and all desires is taken as an ethical goal (such as “the greatest happiness of the greatest number”)—men have no choice but to hate, fear and fight one another, because their desires and their interests will necessarily clash. If “desire” is the ethical standard, then one man’s desire to produce and another man’s desire to rob him have equal ethical validity; one man’s desire to be free and another man’s desire to enslave him have equal ethical validity; one man’s desire to be loved and admired for his virtues and another man’s desire for undeserved love and unearned admiration have equal ethical validity. And if the frustration of *any* desire constitutes a *sacrifice*, then a man who owns an automobile and is robbed of it, *is* being sacrificed, but so is the man who wants or “aspires to” an automobile which the owner refuses to give him—and these two “sacrifices” have equal ethical status. If so, then man’s only choice is to rob or be robbed, to destroy or be destroyed, to sacrifice others to any desire of his own or to sacrifice himself to any desire of others; then man’s only ethical alternative is to be a sadist or a masochist.

The *moral cannibalism* of all hedonist and altruist doctrines lies in the premise that the happiness of one man necessitates the injury of another.

Today, most people hold this premise as an absolute not to be questioned. And when one speaks of man’s right to exist for his own sake, for his own rational self-interest, most people assume automatically that this means his right to sacrifice others. Such an assumption is a confession of their own belief that to injure, enslave, rob or murder others is in man’s self-interest—

which he must selflessly renounce. The idea that man's self-interest can be served only by a non-sacrificial relationship with others has never occurred to those humanitarian apostles of unselfishness, who proclaim their desire to achieve the brotherhood of men. And it will not occur to them, or to anyone, so long as the concept "rational" is omitted from the context of "values," "desires," "self-interest" and *ethics*.

The Objectivist ethics proudly advocates and upholds *rational selfishness*—which means: the values required for man's survival *qua* man—which means: the values required for *human* survival—not the values produced by the desires, the emotions, the "aspirations," the feelings, the whims or the needs of irrational brutes, who have never outgrown the primordial practice of human sacrifices, have never discovered an industrial society and can conceive of no self-interest but that of grabbing the loot of the moment.

The Objectivist ethics holds that *human* good does not require human sacrifices and cannot be achieved by the sacrifice of anyone to anyone. It holds that the *rational* interests of men do not clash—that there is no conflict of interests among men who do not desire the unearned, who do not make sacrifices nor accept them, who deal with one another as *traders*, giving value for value.

The principle of *trade* is the only rational ethical principle for all human relationships, personal and social, private and public, spiritual and material. It is the principle of *justice*.

A trader is a man who earns what he gets and does not give or take the undeserved. He does not treat men as masters or slaves, but as independent equals. He deals with men by means of a free, voluntary, unforced, uncoerced exchange—an exchange which benefits both parties by their own independent judgment. A trader does not expect to be paid for his defaults, only for his achievements. He does not switch to others the burden of his failures, and he does not mortgage his life into bondage to the failures of others.

In spiritual issues—(by "spiritual" I mean: "pertaining to man's consciousness")—the currency or medium of exchange is different, but the principle is the same. Love, friendship, respect, admiration are the emotional response of one man to the virtues of another, the spiritual *payment* given in exchange for the personal, selfish pleasure which one man derives from the virtues of another man's character. Only a brute or an altruist would claim that the appreciation of another person's virtues is an act of selflessness, that as far as one's own selfish interest and pleasure are concerned, it makes no difference whether one deals with a genius or a fool, whether one meets a

hero or a thug, whether one marries an ideal woman or a slut. In spiritual issues, a trader is a man who does not seek to be loved for his weaknesses or flaws, only for his virtues, and who does not grant his love to the weaknesses or the flaws of others, only to their virtues.

To love is to value. Only a rationally selfish man, a man of *self-esteem*, is capable of love—because he is the only man capable of holding firm, consistent, uncompromising, unbetrayed values. The man who does not value himself, cannot value anything or anyone.

It is only on the basis of rational selfishness—on the basis of justice—that men can be fit to live together in a free, peaceful, prosperous, benevolent, *rational* society.

Can man derive any personal benefit from living in a human society? Yes—if it is a *human* society. The two great values to be gained from social existence are: knowledge and trade. Man is the only species that can transmit and expand his store of knowledge from generation to generation; the knowledge potentially available to man is greater than any one man could begin to acquire in his own life-span; every man gains an incalculable benefit from the knowledge discovered by others. The second great benefit is the division of labor: it enables a man to devote his effort to a particular field of work and to trade with others who specialize in other fields. This form of cooperation allows all men who take part in it to achieve a greater knowledge, skill and productive return on their effort than they could achieve if each had to produce everything he needs, on a desert island or on a self-sustaining farm.

But these very benefits indicate, delimit and define what kind of men can be of value to one another and in what kind of society: only rational, productive, independent men in a rational, productive, free society. Parasites, moochers, looters, brutes and thugs can be of no value to a human being—nor can he gain any benefit from living in a society geared to *their* needs, demands and protection, a society that treats him as a sacrificial animal and penalizes him for his virtues in order to reward *them* for their vices, which means: a society based on the ethics of altruism. No society can be of value to man's life if the price is the surrender of his right to his life.

The basic political principle of the Objectivist ethics is: no man may *initiate* the use of physical force against others. No man—or group or society or government—has the right to assume the role of a criminal and initiate the use of physical compulsion against any man. Men have the right to use physical force *only* in retaliation and *only* against those who initiate its use. The ethical principle involved is simple and clear-cut: it is the difference between murder and self-defense. A holdup man seeks to gain a

value, wealth, by killing his victim; the victim does not grow richer by killing a holdup man. The principle is: no man may obtain any values from others by resorting to physical force.

The only proper, *moral* purpose of a government is to protect man's rights, which means: to protect him from physical violence—to protect his right to his own life, to his own liberty, to his own *property* and to the pursuit of his own happiness. Without property rights, no other rights are possible.

I will not attempt, in a brief lecture, to discuss the political theory of Objectivism. Those who are interested will find it presented in full detail in *Atlas Shrugged*. I will say only that every political system is based on and derived from a theory of ethics—and that the Objectivist ethics is the moral base needed by that politico-economic system which, today, is being destroyed all over the world, destroyed precisely for lack of a *moral*, philosophical defense and validation: the original American system, *Capitalism*. If it perishes, it will perish by default, undiscovered and unidentified: no other subject has ever been hidden by so many distortions, misconceptions and misrepresentations. Today, few people know what capitalism is, how it works and what was its actual history.

When I say “capitalism,” I mean a full, pure, uncontrolled, unregulated laissez-faire capitalism—with a separation of state and economics, in the same way and for the same reasons as the separation of state and church. A pure system of capitalism has never yet existed, not even in America; various degrees of government control had been undercutting and distorting it from the start. Capitalism is not the system of the past; it is the system of the future—if mankind is to have a future.

For those who are interested in the history and the psychological causes of the philosophers' treason against capitalism, I will mention that I discuss them in the title essay of my book *For the New Intellectual*.³

The present discussion has to be confined to the subject of ethics. I have presented the barest essentials of my system, but they are sufficient to indicate in what manner the Objectivist ethics is the morality of life—as against the three major schools of ethical theory, the mystic, the social, the subjective, which have brought the world to its present state and which represent the morality of death.

These three schools differ only in their method of approach, not in their content. In content, they are merely variants of altruism, the ethical theory which regards man as a sacrificial animal, which holds that man has no right

³ Ayn Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, New York: Random House, 1961; New American Library, 1963.

to exist for his own sake, that service to others is the only justification of his existence, and that self-sacrifice is his highest moral duty, virtue and value. The differences occur only over the question of who is to be sacrificed to whom. Altruism holds *death* as its ultimate goal and standard of value—and it is logical that renunciation, resignation, self-denial, and every other form of suffering, including self-destruction, are the virtues it advocates. And, logically, these are the only things that the practitioners of altruism have achieved and are achieving now.

Observe that these three schools of ethical theory are anti-life, not merely in content, but also in their method of approach.

The mystic theory of ethics is explicitly based on the premise that the standard of value of man's ethics is set beyond the grave, by the laws or requirements of another, supernatural dimension, that ethics is impossible for man to practice, that it is unsuited for and opposed to man's life on earth, and that man must take the blame for it and suffer through the whole of his earthly existence, to atone for the guilt of being unable to practice the impracticable. The Dark Ages and the Middle Ages are the existential monument to *this* theory of ethics.

The social theory of ethics substitutes “society” for God—and although it claims that its chief concern is life on earth, it is *not* the life of man, not the life of an individual, but the life of a disembodied entity, *the collective*, which, in relation to every individual, consists of everybody except himself. As far as the individual is concerned, *his* ethical duty is to be the selfless, voiceless, rightless slave of any need, claim or demand asserted by others. The motto “dog eat dog”—which is *not* applicable to capitalism nor to dogs—*is* applicable to the social theory of ethics. The existential monuments to *this* theory are Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia.

The subjectivist theory of ethics is, strictly speaking, not a theory, but a negation of ethics. And more: it is a negation of reality, a negation not merely of man's existence, but of *all* existence. Only the concept of a fluid, plastic, indeterminate, Heraclitean universe could permit anyone to think or to preach that man needs no *objective* principles of action—that reality gives him a blank check on values—that anything he cares to pick as the good or the evil, will do—that a man's whim is *a* valid moral standard, and that the only question is how to get away with it. The existential monument to *this* theory is the present state of our culture.

It is not men's *immorality* that is responsible for the collapse now threatening to destroy the civilized world, but the kind of *moralities* men have been asked to practice. The responsibility belongs to the philosophers of altruism. They have no cause to be shocked by the spectacle of their own

success, and no right to damn human nature: men have obeyed them and have brought their moral ideals into full reality.

It is philosophy that sets men's goals and determines their course; it is only philosophy that can save them now. Today, the world is facing a choice: if civilization is to survive, it is the altruist morality that men have to reject.

I will close with the words of John Galt, which I address, as he did, to all the moralists of altruism, past or present:

“You have been using fear as your weapon and have been bringing death to man as his punishment for rejecting your morality. We offer him life as his reward for accepting ours.”