



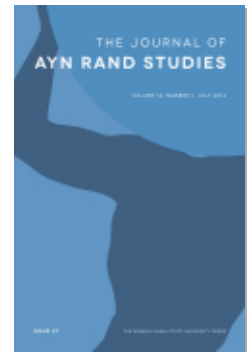
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The Problem with Selfishness

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The Problem with Selfishness

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ABSTRACT: Ayn Rand argued that “selfish” is the correct designation for a person living according to the Objectivist ethics and that selfishness is a virtue. The accuracy of this claim is examined along with the meaning of “selfish,” the wider implications for the Objectivist ethics, and ethics in general. Alternatives to the term are suggested.

Introduction

Have you ever had this experience? You become friends with Sally. She’s really a great person: hardworking, honest, and honorable, with integrity. Over the years, you find out that she doesn’t have much of an explicit philosophy, but the ideas she does have and her actions show that she’s very reasonable, that she’s dedicated to personal happiness for herself and others, and that she’s committed to freedom.

Over the course of time, she’s come to know who *you are*. She knows how you act and what you think, and she’s begun to realize that you have a really different point of view. She’s grasped that you have an explicit set of ideas that you use to direct your life—what *you* would call a philosophy.

One day while at dinner with her, she says, “How is it that you are able to see why George (a coworker) is such a bastard? He seems *saintly* to most people. How did you see through him?” You answer: “Because I know the bad ideas

he's using to control other people—and some of those same ideas make him seem saintly to others. I learned about them from the philosopher, Ayn Rand.” Then Sally says, “Gee, would you tell me more about Rand’s ideas?” You give a brief description of Rand’s philosophy, talking about the dedication to reality and reason and the belief that everyone should act in a long-range manner for his or her personal happiness. Sally nods and smiles, eagerly agreeing with these views and soaking up what you have to say. Then you say: “So you see, Ayn Rand advocates an ethics of rational selfishness.”

And suddenly she looks deeply troubled. She *cannot* make sense of what you mean. She’s agreed with everything you’ve said up to this point and you know it makes good sense to her because of her own personal actions and view. But she simply can’t reconcile how your ethic is one of *selfishness*, or how *you* are an example of a selfish person.

Some would say Sally is so imbued with the traditional way of thinking about ethics that she simply cannot grasp Rand’s concept of selfishness. They would say that this makes her reject a self-interested approach: that’s why she’s so confused and resistant. She’s simply too steeped in altruism.

But I would say otherwise. I would say that Sally’s a very sensible person, and she just can’t compute how your views are *selfish*, because experience tells her otherwise. Experience tells her that the word “selfish” is usually reserved for a kind of person entirely different from you *or* her.

Does this scenario seem familiar to you? Have you run into this problem when you’ve tried to describe Randian selfishness, or use the word “selfish” with people outside of Objectivist circles?

Actually, I find the word often avoided even *within* Objectivist circles. All with good reason.

Ayn Rand and Selfishness

In *The Virtue of Selfishness*, Ayn Rand made a forceful argument for claiming “selfishness” as a virtuous concept, worthy and *necessary* for promoting the best in human life as she envisioned it. She said,

The title of this book may evoke the kind of question that I hear once in a while: “Why do you use the word ‘selfishness’ to denote virtuous qualities of character, when that word antagonizes so many people to whom it does not mean the things you mean?” . . .

The meaning ascribed in popular usage to the word “selfishness” is not merely wrong; it represents a devastating intellectual “package-deal,” which is responsible, more than any other single factor, for the arrested moral development of mankind.

In popular usage, the word “selfishness” is a synonym of evil; the image it conjures is of a murderous brute who tramples over piles of corpses to achieve his own ends, who cares for no living being and pursues nothing but the gratification of the mindless whims of any immediate moment.

Yet the exact meaning and dictionary definition of the word “selfishness” is: *concern with one’s own interests*.

This concept does *not* include a moral evaluation; it does not tell us whether concern with one’s own interests is good or evil; nor does it tell us what constitutes man’s actual interests. It is the task of ethics to answer such questions. . . .

Altruism declares that any action taken for the benefit of others is good, and any action taken for one’s own benefit is evil. . . .

If it is true that what I mean by “selfishness” is not what is meant conventionally, then *this* is one of the worst indictments of altruism: it means that altruism *permits no concept* of a self-respecting, self-supporting man—a man who supports his life by his own effort and neither sacrifices himself nor others. (Rand 1964, vii–ix)

This last *is* a terrible problem and I, like many others, have been waging a war of words over this issue for years, trying to reclaim the honor of the ethically self-interested man. But, as I indicated in my scenario with Sally, I’ve found that trying to re-define the word “selfishness” is a losing battle.¹

For one thing, what do we call those people who are *not* acting for the interest of others, yet, are *not* acting in their own, *long-term* self-interest? There are many of them in the world, as well as many people who are inconsistent in acting for their long-range self-interest.

- What do we call the actions of a businessman who tries to get money by giving less service than he promised?
- What do we call a brother who sneakily takes all the dessert at the dinner table?
- What do we call a friend who knowingly makes you wait for her at a restaurant because she decides to stay with her boyfriend a half hour longer?

How do we categorize these actions ethically? Usually, they are called *selfish*. Certainly, they aren’t altruistically self-sacrificial. The *Oxford English Dictionary* would concur with this usage. The *Oxford* is known for its extensive research into the origins and uses of words. Unlike the definition Rand cites, the *Oxford’s* definition of “selfish” qualifies its meaning with “[d]evoted to or concerned with one’s own advantage or welfare *to the exclusion of regard for others*” (emphasis added).

And the *Oxford* isn't alone in this qualification—just take a look at the definitions at www.dictionary.com, such as Princeton's *WordNet*: “selfishness: stinginess resulting from a concern for your own welfare and a disregard of others.”² These definitions do not apply to those who think and act for their long-range interest. Such people are *often* concerned with the interests of others.

- Any rational businessman is concerned with the interests of his customers—or they won't trade with him for long.
- Any rational brother would not take all the dessert, because he knows it wouldn't be fair and would likely result in hostility and conflict with other family members.
- Any rational friend does not inconsiderately keep you waiting—because she wants to keep your friendship.

Rand's characters often openly comment on their self-interested concern for others' interests, as in this exchange between Dagny and Rearden in *Atlas Shrugged*. Rearden has just agreed to sell her the Rearden metal she needs to build the John Galt Line:

“Don't show that you're relieved.” His voice was mocking. “Not too obviously.” His narrowed eyes were watching her with an unrevealing smile. “I might think that I hold Taggart Transcontinental in my power.”

“You know that, anyway.”

“I do. And I intend to make you pay for it.”

“I expect to. How much?”

“Twenty dollars extra per ton on the balance of the order delivered after today.”

“Pretty steep, Hank. Is that the best price you can give me?”

“No. But that's the one I'm going to get. I could ask twice that and you'd pay it.”

“Yes, I would. And you could. But you won't.”

“Why won't I?”

“Because you need to have the Rio Norte Line built. It's your first showcase for Rearden Metal.”

He chuckled. “That's right. I like to deal with somebody who has no illusions about getting favors.”

“Do you know what made me feel relieved, when you decided to take advantage of it?”

“What?”

“That I was dealing, for once, with somebody who doesn't pretend to give favors.” (Rand 1957, 84)

Generally, as illustrated here and elsewhere, her heroes are highly aware of each other's needs and desires—and often try to fulfill them.

It is only rational to take others' interests into account when pursuing our own, since much of human life and the striving for human value revolve around our relationships with other people. If we are logical and can think in principle, we recognize that others have the same rights, needs, and legitimate expectations we have as human beings, and we respect those. The truly long-range thinker recognizes that honesty, awareness of the other, offering value for value, and minimizing emotionally driven conflict are usually the best interpersonal strategies by which to attain long-term self-interest. As Rand (1964) said,

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.* (27)

Given the conventional usage of “selfish,” this is not “selfishness.” Despite the aforementioned problems with the word “selfish,” I don't want to discount Rand's concern about how its negative meaning, quoted above, is often used *in order to discredit rationally self-interested people*. She brilliantly illustrates how this works through the scenes with Rearden's family in *Atlas Shrugged*.

Many of the dictionary definitions of “selfishness” emphasize an “excessive” interest in self (see note 1) without specifying what that is. None names what the right amount would be. This needs to be defined by ethics, so can it be dismissed in a definition?

What do we do about this problem with using the word “selfishness”?

Selfishness versus Altruism

“Ethics is a code of values to guide man's choices and actions. . . . In order to choose, [man] requires a standard of value. . . . What is to be the goal or purpose of a man's actions? Who is to be the intended *beneficiary* of his actions?” (57). That is, every ethical choice requires a “to whom” and “for what.”

How, then, should we categorize action ethically? “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” (24–25).

Does this imply that, according to Objectivism, one has only two choices of beneficiary: acting for the sake of another, or acting for the sake of oneself

as a rational being? Some people don't act either way. They don't act to benefit others, and they don't reason objectively about what is good for them. The worst of them tend to want to do whatever they want to do, to follow their *desires* not their *reason*. They live for the moment, in the short range.

In her nonfiction, Rand had a variety of epithets for such people, most prominently, “whim worshippers.” James Taggart and Betty Pope come to mind from her fiction.

Rand also examines another kind of individual in “Selfishness Without a Self.” This kind of person defines himself by being the opposite of the conventional, rather than pursuing his own, firsthand goals and values. She describes this type of person as a “tribal lone wolf” (an amusingly paradoxical name) and says he has a “perceptual mentality.”

With all of his emphasis on “himself” (and on being “loved for himself”), the tribal lone wolf has no self and no personal interests, only momentary whims. He is aware of his own immediate sensations and of very little else. Observe that whenever he ventures to speak of spiritual (i.e., intellectual) values—of the things he personally loves or admires—one is shocked by the triteness, the vulgarity, the borrowed trashiness of what comes out of him. . . . The abdication and shriveling of the self is a salient characteristic of all perceptual mentalities. . . . (Rand 1984, 67–68)

The people she's talking about are tribal because they define themselves against their group; they're lone wolves because they try to define themselves as the opposite of the group's conventions. They're “perceptual mentalities” because they are using concepts as if they are percepts, as concrete things, and act short-term. Does she illustrate this type in her fiction? Perhaps Lois Cook, the so-called poet in *The Fountainhead*, was an illustration of this. None of Rand's characters are conventional “lone wolves” such as psychopaths (although perhaps the description of the tribal lone wolf would fit many psychopaths).

What implication does the tribal lone wolf have for the Objectivist ethics? In *The Virtue of Selfishness*, Rand argues, “Man cannot survive, like an animal, by acting on the range of the moment. . . the alternative his nature offers him is: rational being or suicidal animal” (Rand 1964, 25–26).

Let's Talk to the Animals

Rand says these types have a perceptual mentality, like an animal. Animals do not have the cognitive capacity for conscious, long-range planning; they cannot reason to pursue their needs and goals. They act on their perceptual judgments and emotional reactions.

This type of person is not mentally functioning as a human being, rationally judging, planning, and choosing who should benefit from his actions. Therefore, he is not acting selfishly, in the fully human sense, nor altruistically.

But if he is not benefitting himself or others, who then is the beneficiary of his action, assuming there is an intended beneficiary? I think Rand's right, these types of people function like animals—and I think they often act for their *animal selves*.

Apes recognize their own selves in the mirror (Gallup 1970)—but of course they can't act with reason for their long-range interest. They are motivated to act in what they *perceive* is their interest, using perceptual awareness and judgments, which include feelings and desires arising from their nature.

The same holds true for human beings, except that human beings cannot live successfully by their perceptual judgments, feelings, and desires *alone*. Our nature is less set; it requires that we know more, understand more, plan more than other animals—in short, that we *reason extensively* about what to do with our lives.

Yet, there are many people who, in whole or in part, act like animals in pursuing their self-interest. They don't think in principle about what they're doing and they don't carefully choose long-range, productive goals.

Worse, they often use their reasoning capacities to achieve their short-range, frequently destructive goals. The most spiritually deformed use their reason to grotesque purposes, like a con man in a complex Ponzi scheme or a Nazi intelligence officer figuring out the cleverest way to track down and torture someone.

They are acting for their selves in an animalistic sense, that is, for their short-term bodily pleasures and emotional goals such as vanity, fame, glory, social position, or power. See the characters of Ralston Holcombe, James Taggart, or Comrade Sonia in Rand's work for some examples.³ Ultimately, they lead miserable, fear-ridden, anxious lives.

In my experience, fair and honest people of good thinking and character usually use the word “selfish” in regard to *this* type of person or apply it to a person who is inconsistent and sometimes acts short-range.

Rand deftly dramatizes this latter type with such people as *The Fountainhead's* Peter Keating. Keating is presented as a conventionally greedy, grasping careerist of vaulting ambition. He will do anything to attain fame and fortune—including purposefully precipitating the death of his firm's partner, Lucius Heyer, who stands in Keating's way.

However, in her journal notes on Peter Keating, Rand describes him as a selfless and sacrificing . . . *egotist*:

A perfect example of the selfless man who is a ruthless, unprincipled egotist—in the accepted meaning of the word. A tremendous vanity and greed, which leads him to sacrifice all for the sake of a “brilliant career.” A mob man at heart, of the mob and for the mob. His triumph

is his disaster. Left as an empty bitter wreck, his “second-hand life” takes the form of sacrificing all for the sake of a victory which has no meaning and gives him no satisfaction. Because his means become his end. He shows that a selfless man cannot be ethical. He has no self and, therefore, cannot have any ethics. A man who never could be [man as he should be]. And doesn’t know it. (Harriman 1997, 88–89)

In Rand’s analysis, Keating is selfless because he is not acting as a rational being; his life “takes the form of sacrificing all”—to the opinions and approval of others—“a victory which has no meaning and gives him no satisfaction.” A “selfless egotist” is paradoxical because “egotist” is an alternative meaning of the word “selfish” (see note 1 on dictionary definitions).

Yet, Keating is not an altruist in the philosophical sense, giving up fame and fortune to *help* others. He doesn’t give up the quest for money and position, as his love Catherine Halsey does.

In what respect is he sacrificing? His is a psychological sacrifice, a sacrifice of character and achievements. He sacrifices his own personal desires and goals, his love of Catherine and of painting. He sacrifices his rational self, giving up his own judgment as he desperately seeks others’ approval and admiration—for *his* “vanity and greed.” In other words, he sacrifices his actual, long-term well-being and self-esteem in his attempt to gain self-esteem and well-being through the shortcut of social approval and social climbing.

The approval—the good opinion—of others and his position in the social hierarchy are his ape-like substitutes for pursuing his own, self-chosen values and goals. It is not a matter of long-range reasoning versus short-range reasoning because he carefully plans much of his action. It is a matter of the psychological beneficiary.

In Rand’s view, he lacks a *full* human self, in the sense of a reasoning, long-range, independent thinker. Instead, he uses his intelligence like a clever ape—to plot long-range career moves in the social hierarchy, not to achieve personally-chosen, independent artistic or productive goals.

People such as the “tribal lone wolf” or Peter Keating do not have full human selves. But then, I must ask again, when this kind of person acts, who benefits from his actions?

Conceptual Classifications

Objectivism gives us no way to formally classify this behavior. The consequence? If those who try to act in a long-term, prolife manner to pursue their self-interest are *selfish* in the Randian sense, everybody else must be lumped into the *altruist* category. And this is what has tended to happen among Objectivist thinkers and writers.

Rand's colorful epithets do not name any clear *ethical category* for the Keatings et al. Despite the fact that she called Keating altruistic, *he's not in the strict philosophical sense. He doesn't act for the sake of others.*

Remember, altruism means "a selfless concern for others," "the principle or practice of unselfish concern for or devotion to the welfare of others (opposed to egoism)" (Dictionary.com).

Here's how the term's originator, Auguste Comte, describes the ethical position and justification:

Positivism only recognizes duties, duties of all to all. Placing itself as it does, at the social point of view, it cannot tolerate the notion of *rights*, for such notion rests on individualism. We are born under a load of obligations of every kind, to our predecessors, to our successors, to our contemporaries. After our birth these obligations increase or accumulate, for it is some time before we can return any service. . . . This ["to live for others"], the definitive formula of human morality, gives a direct sanction exclusively to our instincts of benevolence, the common source of happiness and duty. [Man must serve] Humanity, whose we are entirely. (Comte 1891, 332)⁴

Clearly, this description doesn't fit many kinds of actions and people; using only the selfish/altruist dichotomy does not make full sense of all possible human actions.⁵ To deal with this problem, Objectivists tend to apply the terms "rational" and "irrational" to ethical choices. Everything that purportedly follows principles of Randian self-interest is *rational*, while everything else is not. This conceptual tradition shows up on email lists, in articles, conference lectures, and discussions everywhere among Objectivists.

However, reasoning about actions and values is but one necessary component of making ethical choices—necessary but not sufficient to achieving the good. One must also choose the right beneficiary of one's action.

And this is a very, very difficult thing to determine in many situations. Identifying all one's ideas and values consciously and determining if they correctly reflect reality and are the most beneficial to one's self and one's values is a complex project. Every idea can't be examined all at once. It takes years to examine the ideas and values acquired in childhood, or even those unconsciously accepted in adulthood. Sometimes a person is so busy producing, that he does not examine his ethical premises until a crisis or serious conflict arises that brings the issues to his attention. Hank Rearden's characterization in *Atlas Shrugged* illustrates this problem.

Ultimately, one's actions depend on one's thinking. But a great advantage of the human method of cognition is that alternative actions can be mentally entertained without putting them into practice. In fact, in order to arrive at

truth, a wide variety of ideas *must* be entertained to check and cross-check with the facts, to analyze and debate. And, even so, examining ideas and values and thinking carefully about them doesn't ensure that one will discover the right answers for one's needs and ethical choices.

The entire process of civilization beginning with the Greeks has been one of making the implicit explicit, the subconscious conscious, and human choices and values more and more clear. Chris Matthew Sciabarra ([1995] 2013) discusses these and their history at some length in his book *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical* (now in its second edition).

Furthermore, sometimes people reason themselves to positions and principles that are actually counter-life, or they acquire good values in their upbringing without a lot of thought. Within their ethical system, the Jesuits and the Talmudists are extraordinary reasoners and try to live their lives long-term. The Jesuits can be perfectly rational too, but their premise regarding the beneficiary of action is different from Objectivism's.

Only the person who ignores contradictions *that come to his attention* is willfully refusing to see truth, that is, being irrational. Feelings, especially feelings of conflict, might be what bring the contradictions to attention. And even so, these feelings can swirl around in a half-conscious way if the person is busy and/or not skilled at introspection. The feelings can inadvertently remain out of attentional awareness.

Only when a person realizes that he should pay attention to some facts, some contradictions, and some feelings, yet *purposefully* ignores them repeatedly, does that person choose evil by willfully refusing to examine the truth.

Is it correct, then to apply the adjectives "rational" and "irrational" to all choices and values that are not those specified or clearly implied by the Objectivist ethics? Are all other values and virtues and standards simply illogical or anti-factual?

Let's turn to an analysis of Hank Rearden for clarity—is he irrational, willfully refusing to recognize truth when he treats his family well—or is he mistaken? Rearden is characterized as ruthlessly and consistently committed to the truth, but important issues and conflicts lay outside of his conscious awareness for some time. He is not omniscient, he can't think of everything. As Dagny recognizes, he is *mistaken* in his views and values.

In Rearden's case, he fulfills the first of Rand's principles of ethics, "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" (Rand 1964, 23).

Rearden actively thinks and chooses his values—when he becomes aware of the issues. His mistakes concern the second principle: "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." Rearden acts contrary to his real needs. He does not always make himself the beneficiary of his actions; in fact some of his choices are contrary to his interests, such as his contribution to his brother, Philip's, organization. Here's the scene:

"What's the matter, Phil?" Rearden asked, approaching him. "You look all done in."

"I've had a hard day," said Philip sullenly.

"You're not the only one who works hard," said his mother, "Others have problems, too—even if they're not billion-dollar, trans-super-continental problems like yours."

"Why that's good. I always thought that Phil should find some interest of his own."

"Good? You mean you like to see your brother sweating his health away? It amuses you, doesn't it? I always thought it did."

"Why, no, Mother. I'd like to help."

"You don't have to help. You don't have to feel anything for any of us."

Rearden had never known what his brother was doing or wished to do.

He had sent Philip through college, but Philip had not been able to decide on any specific ambition. There was something wrong, by Rearden's standards, with a man who did not seek any gainful employment, but he would not impose his standards on Philip; he could afford to support his brother and never notice the expense. Let him take it easy, Rearden had thought for years, let him have a chance to choose his career without the strain of struggling for a livelihood.

"What were you doing today, Phil?" he asked patiently.

"It wouldn't interest you."

"It does interest me. That's why I'm asking."

"I had to see twenty different people all over the place, from here to Redding to Wilmington."

"What did you have to see them about?"

"I am trying to raise money for Friends of Global Progress." . . .

He remained silent. Philip added without being prompted, "We need to raise ten thousand dollars for a vital program, but it's a martyr's task, trying to raise money. There's not a speck of social conscience left in people. When I think of the kind of bloated money-bags I saw today—why, they spend more than that on any whim, but I couldn't squeeze just a hundred bucks a piece out of them, which was all I asked. They have no sense of moral duty, no. . . . What are you laughing at?" he asked sharply. Rearden stood before him, grinning. . . .

And then Rearden thought suddenly that he could break through Philip's chronic wretchedness for once, give him a shock of pleasure, the unexpected gratification of a hopeless desire. He thought: What do I care about the nature of his desire?—it's his, just as Rearden Metal was mine—it must mean to him what that meant to me—let's see him happy just once, it might teach him something—didn't I say that happiness is the agent of purification?—I'm celebrating tonight, so let him share in it—it will be so much for him, and so little for me.

"Philip," he said smiling, "call Miss Ives at my office tomorrow. She'll have a check for you for ten thousand dollars." (Rand 1957, 46–47)

Why does he do this? He wants to make Philip happy. As Rand writes the scene, this is his conscious intention and he has no ulterior motive. The implication in the scene is that he, Rearden, would derive pleasure from being the source of Philip's happiness through the use of Rearden's money. As Rand writes the scene, Rearden is consciously reasoning about his choices; however, he has a subjective ethical standard: "There was something wrong, by Rearden's standards. . . but he would not impose his standards on Philip" (46).

Is he acting irrationally—or is he merely mistaken? How do we ethically categorize his action?

Instead of "rational" and "irrational," I propose we use the words "objective" and "subjective" to convey the right distinctions. Their conventional senses, which follow, make their meaning easily grasped by most people:

"Objective"—"not influenced by personal feelings, interpretations, or prejudice; based on facts; unbiased: an objective opinion," "existing independently of perception or an individual's conceptions."

"Subjective"—"belonging to, proceeding from, or relating to the mind of the thinking subject and not the nature of the object being considered," "existing in the mind; belonging to the thinking subject rather than to the *object* of thought (opposed to *objective*)." (Dictionary.com)

Perhaps also "objectively good" and "objectively bad" would be clearer terms to describe what is meant by "rational" and "irrational."

Using the objective/subjective distinction, I have identified at least three categories in which ethical action falls—this is a tentative analysis, there may be more. Note that the person's motives and intentions are important in determining the ethical status of the actions.

Objectively altruistic (Comtian self-sacrifice); that is, truly giving up or destroying a greater value for a lesser. For example, biblical Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac because that's what he thinks God told him to do. Or dedicating

your life to a career in social work because you are helping people, although you don't like the work itself/you have some other you'd enjoy much more (Catherine Halsey).

Objectively self-interested (Randian rational selfishness); that is, using reason to pursue long-range self-interest for the achievement of personal happiness and fulfillment according to man's nature and needs. For example, a painter living frugally and simply for ten years in order to focus all her talents on developing and executing her paintings because that's what she enjoys doing the most in life or a businessman working sixteen-hour days without a vacation for three years, developing and marketing a new invention that excites him and will make a lot of money. This category includes, but is not exclusive to, Rand's Objectivist ethics; Aristotle's ethics and others derived in a rational, fact-based fashion would be included in this category.

Subjectively self-interested; that is, pursuing what is thought or felt to be one's "interest" regardless of the long-range consequences or harm. This category has at least two subcategories to it:

The conventionally selfish person who consciously pursues short-term self-interest, for example, billing a customer for work he didn't do. Or lying to one boyfriend about the existence of another in order not to deal with the conflict. Or paying a technician to set one up with cable TV that will not be billed by the cable company, with the rationalization that the company is a monopoly.

The apparently altruistic person who claims or appears to act for the sake of others; appearing to be self-sacrificing in terms of money or recognition, while pursuing the ulterior motive of power, control, position, and glory. Usually forgoing short-term material interest for power and prestige. Most such people are not perfectly conscious of their ulterior motives, such as a control-seeking bureaucrat who thinks he is working at a lesser-paying job for the government in order to "do good," or Rearden's mother. They mentally cloak their ulterior motives in the mantra of altruism. This is unlike *The Fountainhead's* Ellsworth Toohey, who is highly conscious of how he is using altruism to gain power. These types like Ellsworth Toohey are among the most twisted of beings, as they use their reasoning powers to achieve these ends, sometimes with complex, long-range schemes.

I am not sure I have identified all possibilities. Objectivists need a vigorous discussion about this issue.

The Problem with Selfishness

Rand was right-on to complain that there is no term to describe the self-supporting, self-respecting man. But the term “selfishness” has many problems and confuses people—detering them from understanding the noble meaning of the Objectivist ethics.

Various movements, even those not definitely connected to Objectivism, have attempted to create new terms to deal with this problem, such as “self-fulfillment.” Unfortunately, they now have too much association with New Age and leftist views.

“Egoism” is at least a philosophical term. Perhaps calling the Objectivist view “inspired egoism” could telegraph the noble qualities packed into Rand’s ethical views in a simple way, getting it across without immediate and deep confusion.

Unfortunately, “egoism” is not an easily grasped term either. Its meaning is not immediate to the average English speaker. And egoism’s connotations have some of the same problems as “selfishness.” In contrast, “individualism” is a well-known and accepted term to many. Perhaps “inspired individualism” would be best, since it clarifies the kind of individualism advocated.

I welcome suggestions.

But let’s leave selfishness to the whim worshippers rather than apply it to Rand’s heroic vision of living.

NOTES

Thanks to my always-supportive husband, John Enright, and friends Irfan Khawaja and Francisco Villalobos for commentary that helped me clarify this article.

1. Her attempts to redefine selfishness are parallel and closely related to her work to redefine capitalism as an “unknown ideal” of free trade. Capitalism was a term coined by the socialists to attack self-interested businessmen (Sciabarra [1995] 2013, 264–65).

2. In this extended note, let’s explore some definitions and usages found in various works. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

Selfish—1. Devoted to or concerned with one’s own advantage or welfare to the exclusion of regard for *others*.

b. Used (by Adversaries) as a designation of those ethical theories which regard self-love as the real motive of all human action.

In Hackett’s life of Archbishop Williams, *Scriveria Reserata* (1693) II. \$136, the word is said to be of the Presbyterians’ “own new mint”; it is used in reference to events of the year 1641. [Synonyms current in the 17th cent. are *self-ended* and *self-ful*.]

In the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language Fourth Edition*:

Selfishness—The condition or quality of being selfish; selfish disposition or behavior; regard for one's own interest or happiness *to the disregard of the well-being of others*.

Selfless—1. *having no regard for or thought of self*; not self-centered; selfish.

In *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, 1998:

Selfish—Concerned chiefly or only with oneself. "Selfish men were. . . trying to make capital for themselves out of the sacred cause of human right." (Maria Weston Chapman)

Selfishness—The quality or state of being selfish; exclusive regard to one's own interest or happiness; that supreme self-love or self-preference which leads a person to direct his purposes to the advancement of his own interest, power, or happiness, without regarding those of others.

In *WordNet*, 1997 Princeton University:

Selfishness—stinginess resulting from a concern for your own welfare and a disregard of others [ant: unselfishness]

[a vice utterly at variance with the happiness of him who harbors it, and, as such, condemned by self-love.—Sir J. Mackintosh.]

In *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2000):

Egoism—

1. a. The ethical doctrine that morality has its foundations in self-interest.
b. The ethical belief that self-interest is the just and proper motive for all human conduct.
2. Excessive preoccupation with one's own well-being and interests, usually accompanied by an inflated sense of self-importance.
3. Egotism; conceit.

In *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary* (1998):

Egoism—1. (Philos.) The doctrine of certain extreme adherents or disciples of Descartes and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, which finds all the elements of knowledge in the ego and the relations which it implies or provides for.

2. Excessive love and thought of self; the habit of regarding one's self as the center of every interest; selfishness;—opposed to altruism. [Source: *WordNet*® 1.6, ©1997 Princeton University]

In the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

Egoism—1. *Metaphys.* The belief, on the part of an individual, that there is no proof that anything exists but his own mind; chiefly applied to philosophical systems, supposed by their adversaries logically to imply this position. 2. *Ethics.* The theory which regards self-interest as the foundation of morality. Also, in practical sense: Regard to one's own interest, as the supreme guiding principle to action; systematic selfishness. 3. In matters of opinion, a. the habit of looking upon questions chiefly in their relation to oneself. b. Excessive exaltation of one's own opinion; self-opinionatedness. 4. Egotist.

Egotist—one who makes too frequent use of the pronoun I; one who thinks or talks too much of himself; a selfish person.

Egotism—1. the obtrusive or too frequent use of the pronoun of the first person singular: hence the practice of talking about oneself or one's doings. 2. The vice of thinking too much of oneself; self-conceit, boastfulness; also, selfishness.

Individual—from med. Latin *individualis* from *individuus* “indivisible, inseparable (see INDIVIDUUM + al: cf. F. *Individuel* (16th c.), It. *Individuale*. (*Formes individuelle* occurs in Adhelard of Bath, c 1115, (Haureau Philos. Scolast. I. 349); the adv. *Individualiter* in Abelard Epist. I. ii. 5.)]

adj. 1. One in substance or essence; forming an indivisible entity. Obs. Used in 1425. . . .

2. That cannot be separated, indivisible. Obs. . . .

3. a. Existing as a separate indivisible entity; numerically one, single. b. Single as distinct from others of the same kind; particular, special. . . . 1651 Baxter *Inf. Bapt.* 25 “The whole church must be so sanctified: therefore the individual members.”

Individualism—

1. self-centered feeling of conduct as a principle; a mode of life in which the individual pursues his own ends or follows out his own ideas; free and independent action or thought; egoism.

[First use in English:] 1835 tr. H. Reeve translation of DeTocqueville *Democr. in Amer.* li. 1840 III 230 “Individualism is a novel expression, to which a novel idea has given birth. . . . Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow creatures, and to draw apart with his family and friends.

2. The social theory which advocates the free and independent action of the individual, as opposed to communistic methods of organization and state interference. Opposed to collectivism and socialism.

3. *Metaphys.* The doctrine that the individual is a self-determined whole, and that any larger whole is merely an aggregate of individuals, which, if they act upon each other at all, do so only externally.
3. We might even be able to argue that the goals of vanity, social position, and power are motives derived from the ape part of human nature. Ape groups are organized and survive through social hierarchy, and all three of those motives may be derived from those aspects of human nature that are driven by the need for position in the social group.
4. For an extensive discussion of altruism, and Rand's use of the term, see Campbell 2006. One can see all the evils Rand fought against—operative to this day—packed into that quote, from the idea of unchosen duty, to “you didn't build that,” to “giving back,” to “rights don't exist,” to the equation of collectivistic altruism with benevolence, and likely many more I'm not recognizing at the moment.
5. Stephen Hicks analyzes various forms of altruism. See Hicks 2009.

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