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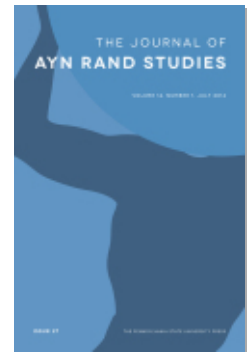
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## Ayn Rand Society Philosophical Studies

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## BOOK REVIEW

# Ayn Rand Society Philosophical Studies

FRED SEDDON

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

Edited by Allan Gotthelf and James G. Lennox  
Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011  
xi + 188 pp., bibliography and index.

### *Concepts and Their Role in Knowledge: Reflections on Objectivist Epistemology*

Edited by Allan Gotthelf and James G. Lennox  
Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013  
xiii + 296 pp., bibliography and index.

**ABSTRACT:** This article reviews the first two works featuring essays derived from talks given before the Ayn Rand Society, an affiliated group of the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division. The books are both edited by the late Allan Gotthelf (editor) and James G. Lennox (associate editor), each dealing with a different aspect of Ayn Rand's philosophy. The first is a study in Ayn Rand's normative theory (*Metaethics, Egoism, and Virtue: Studies in Ayn Rand's Normative Theory*) and the second offers reflections on Rand's theory of knowledge (*Concepts and Their Role in Knowledge: Reflections on Objectivist Epistemology*).

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*Metaethics, Egoism, and Virtue: Studies in Ayn Rand's Normative Theory* is a collection of twelve essays on Rand's normative theory. It is divided into four unequal parts. Part 1, "Reason, Choice, and the Ultimate End," contains essays by Darryl Wright and Gotthelf; part 2, "Metaethics, Objectivism and Analytic" (the word "philosophy" is unintentionally missing from the contents page and the divider page 47, but available as a subtitle to the first essay on page 49) features an essay by Irfan Khawaja and a reply by Paul Bloomfield; part 3, "Egoism and Virtue in Nietzsche and Rand," has a second essay by Wright, this time in response to Christine Swanton; and finally part 4 contains six essays, three by Tara Smith, all in response to three essays written in criticism of her book, *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics*, each written by a different scholar: Swanton, Hellen Cullyer, and Lester H. Hunt, a philosopher who serves as a member of this journal's Board of Advisors.

Wright makes an interesting distinction in his essay, "Virtue and Sacrifice," between a "strong conception of sacrifice" and a "weak conception of sacrifice." Wright defines the former as "a sacrifice [that] can occur only when an agent acts against a *rational* hierarchy of personal values that he has formed" and the latter as "a sacrifice [that involves] . . . forfeiting a higher value for the sake of a lower one, or a nonvalue, relative to one's own value hierarchy whether or not it is rational" (Gotthelf and Lennox 2011, 104, 105; emphasis original). He then asks which definition Rand accepts and engages in a dialectic in which he explores some interesting consequences of both possibilities.

The remainder of this review will focus on the "Smith section" (113–65), which has an "Author Meets Critics" format.

Smith's first essay, "Egoistic Relations with Others," is a response to Cullyer's "Rational Selves, Friends, and the Social Virtues." Cullyer's effort seems to suffer from "otherphobia" in the sense that she thinks that any time we are involved with other people, altruist behavior must result. But all of the conflicts that Cullyer refers to are not, according to Smith, "genuine conflicts" (126). "That an interest is shared, or common to two people, does not render it no longer my interest," Smith writes (127), and I agree.

Smith next replies to Swanton's "Virtuous Egoism and Virtuous Altruism," a title that immediately made me wary. The whole idea that the best way to understand Rand's egoism is via some watered down version of altruism (Swanton believes that extreme altruism is a non-starter; 132) is a wagon she doesn't have the horses to pull. Smith deals with this on pages 143 and 144, and the remainder of the essay is devoted to exposing other misunderstandings on Swanton's part. One example of this is Swanton's claim that Rand's egoism displays an "Insufficient Concern for Others" (147–48). I think of Galt, who not only goes on strike for twelve years but also spends a lot of that time "hankering" for Dagny. And he is willing to leave the valley and return to a collapsing

world so that he can be there when she finally sees the light. Smith rejoins to the claim that “Rand’s ‘altruism’ isn’t altruistic enough” by pointing out that “Rand does not endorse altruism, ‘virtuous’ or any other kind” (147). To that I can only add, “QED.”

The final two essays of the collection, Hunt’s “What Is Included in Virtue” and Smith’s reply, stand out from the others I have looked at in this section, because the differences between the two are not of the right/wrong binary opposition, but rather “relatively minor” and do not involve “misunderstandings” of Rand. It is what one expects from what Plato would call a “benevolent disputation” and Rand might refer to as “chewing.” Both have enlightening things to say, and some of what they say lead the interested reader elsewhere. For example, Hunt cites Aristotle’s notion of *logoi enuloi* (*De Anima* I.1 403a25; Hunt suggests “embodied ideas” as a possible translation) as a contrast concept between “passion” and Kant’s “inclination” (150). He then bemoans the fact that Aristotle “never developed his views on the subject.” But perhaps Hunt would benefit from following Heidegger’s suggestion that the best place to read Aristotle on the “passions” is not the “Psychology” but the “Rhetoric,” especially Book II, chapters 2 to 11. In fairness to Hunt, however, he may be more concerned with Aristotle’s view of the soul/body relation, rather than the passions. The reader will benefit from what both of the authors have to say about Rand’s ethics. This collection is highly recommended.

## Rand’s Epistemology

*Concepts and Their Role in Knowledge: Reflections on Objectivist Epistemology* is divided into two parts. Part 1, titled “Essays,” contains four articles by Ayn Rand Institute-affiliated or “friendly” philosophers, Gotthelf, Gregory Salmieri, Onkar Ghate, and Lennox. (This ensures the reader that there will not be any criticism of Rand, and in 133 pages there is not one negative word.) Part 2, “Discussion,” consists of discussions of the articles from part one by six different thinkers as well as replies by the original four. Part 2 contains 10 entries in all. Part 2 itself is divided into four topics: concepts and kinds, definitions, concepts and theory change, and perceptual awareness.

The book is not for popular consumption and the reason why is not far to seek. The Gotthelf and Lennox contributions to part 1 had their beginnings back in 2003 at the American Philosophical Association during the meeting of the Ayn Rand Society. And other philosophical meetings provided the occasion for the other essays.

This is a scholarly work in every sense of that word, written at the highest level. Readers are well advised to be familiar with, at least, all that Rand has

written on the subject, and it wouldn't hurt to know the background literature of the problematics under consideration.

I would like to conclude with a closer and more critical look at two of the essays from part 1, namely, Gotthelf's and Lennox's.

In "Ayn Rand's Theory of Concepts," Gotthelf, like Rand, begins with a reference to the "the traditional problem of universals" (Gotthelf and Lennox 2013, 3). And just as Rand uses the word "arbitrary" in her characterization of the nominalist position, Gotthelf names names, for example, Hobbes, Hume, and Wittgenstein. But for him, the arbitrariness is a matter of degree, depending on the individual nominalist. So we are told that they range from "zero degree of resemblance (in the case of wholly arbitrary Hobbesian nominalism) to multiple partial resemblances each shared by only some of the particulars (in the case of Wittgenstein's family-resemblance nominalism) to whole resemblances (in the case of Hume's resemblance-nominalism)" (13). Does Hobbes deserve this? Is he a "wholly arbitrary" nominalist?

Gotthelf is not alone in his evaluation, but I'm more hesitant. As Jesseph points out in his essay ("Hobbes and the Method of Natural Science") in the *Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, Hobbes has a notion of true and false definitions, something that makes no sense if concepts are arbitrary. He gives the example of the concept "sunrise." It would be false to define it as "the appearance of the sun over the horizon, as a result of the sun's revolution about the earth" (in Sorell 1996, 101). A true definition would have to mention the earth's diurnal rotation. If this is true, and concepts are limited to stating the true causes of the referents defined, it would seem that Hobbes is not a totally arbitrary nominalist.

Lennox's contribution, "Concepts, Context, and the Advance of Science," is concerned with defending Rand's position that the meaning of a properly formed concept doesn't change, even with the advance of knowledge. In fact, it makes that advance possible. One of the foils that Lennox mentions is Feyerabend, especially his essay, "Explanation, Reduction and Empiricism," in which he maintains the very opposite of Rand's position, namely, that concepts may change their meaning with advances in the growth of knowledge, change that is necessary for that growth. Talk about antipodes.

Lennox is willing to countenance change just about everywhere in the cognitive enterprise except for the concept change. He begins his essay by listing five areas in which change can occur and refers them all to *the conceptual structure of a science*. But as for the meaning of concepts, by which he means the "referents," they never change. In order to show this, he gives several examples. I will look at two from biology.

The first example of referential stability concerns the barnacle (cirripedia). Is it a mollusk or a crustacea? He cites Darwin's four-volume work (!) on barnacle

(I will use this term throughout, although cirripedia appears in the title of the Darwin work). In the end, Darwin won acceptance for classifying barnacle with crustacea. Lennox then states that all during the debate, there was no doubt that the scientists were all talking about barnacles. The referents of barnacles never changed and science had advanced its knowledge. But wait. Lennox has only to look at the two higher level concepts to arrive at the very opposite conclusion. For surely the concepts “mollusks” and “crustacea” had changed. A look into their “file folders” reveals that the referents of those concepts had indeed changed. “Mollusks” now lacked the referents barnacles, while “crustacea” had gained them. When the very example that a thinker chooses is a counterexample to his case, something is seriously wrong.

And the same goes for another example, one that Rand herself discusses in the workshops on *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* (Rand [1966–67] 1990), namely, whales. Whales moved from fish to mammal. And while we have to admit with Lennox that the meaning of whales did not change, surely the meaning of fish and mammal did, that is, their referents changed. Lennox’s examples seem to have the unintended consequence of showing that Feyerabend is closer to the truth here, because knowledge did grow with the change in the concepts. Referential stability, as Feyerabend maintains, is a deterrent to knowledge growth. Lennox seems to sense this when he writes that although concepts like barnacle and whale are referentially stable, the concepts “at the wider level of abstraction . . . must be rethought” (130). I think “rethought” is a euphemism for “changed.” And on the next page he does write that they “have changed” (131).

But this in no way should be taken as diminishing the overall quality of this work. Thinkers who focus on Rand’s epistemology must have this book on their shelves. It is a work that repays several readings (I can personally vouch for that fact) and can serve as a reference source on the topics discussed. Bravo.

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