

## CRITIQUE OF AYN RAND'S "VIRTUE OF SELFISHNESS" IN HER OBJECTIVIST ETHICS

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**Abstract** – Historically, speaking, there have been variations when it comes to the content of virtues. It could be said that the constant features of human life are indeed constant but the virtues that have been recognized at different times and by different cultures vary considerably. This variation of the meaning of virtue across the years has led to Ayn Rand as it were, to see selfishness as a virtue and not a vice. Rand contends that the meaning ascribed in popular usage to the word “selfishness” is not merely wrong, but it equally depicts a devastating intellectual “package deal”. And this she says is responsible for the arrested moral development of mankind compared to any other factor. For Rand, “selfishness” in common parlance, is a synonym of evil; it portrays the image of a murderous brute who tramples over piles of corpses to achieve his or her own ends; who does not care for any living being; who engages only in the gratification of the mindless whims of any immediate moment. However, Rand takes to the dictionary and says that the exact meaning of the word “selfishness” is concern with one’s interests. For her, this definition does not include a moral evaluation neither does it tell us whether concern with one’s own interests is good or evil. It does not equally tell us what constitutes man’s actual interests. It is based on this dictionary meaning of selfishness that Rand totally condemns and rejects altruism as a virtue. She says ethics of altruism has created the image of the brute, as its answer in order to make men accept two inhuman tenets namely: that concern with one’s own interests is evil, regardless of what these interests might be; and that the brute’s activities are in fact to one’s own interest, which altruism enjoins man to renounce for the sake of his neighbours. Rand contends that concern with one’s interests is the essence of a moral existence, and that one must be the beneficiary of one’s own actions. This is why she says objectivist ethics is a morality of a rational self-interest or a rational selfishness. The researcher has employed critical method to bring out the shortcomings of Rand’s views.

**Keywords:** Virtue, Selfishness, Altruism, Objectivist Ethics

### Introduction

In the recent past, moral philosophers have taken a keen interest on the concept of virtue. It is on account of this that more philosophers are of the opinion that a concentration on virtue lays a background foundation with regard to giving account on morality and ethics.

It was Socrates who asked the question in ancient Greece: how should one live? To this question, Plato and Aristotle believe that the answer is to live “virtuously”<sup>1</sup>. Here the task for them is to show how living virtuously would be best for the virtuous person.

From time immemorial, philosophers have shown that the idea of virtue can be understood in various ways. What seems a virtue to one can sometimes appear to be a vice to another. This is obviously the line of thought of Ayn Rand. For according to her, *selfishness* is a virtue while it is conventionally considered as a vice. Admittedly, there is more disagreement on whether a piece of conduct is virtuous than disagreement on whether a given virtue is desirable. The question to be asked before proceeding with this article is: what is virtue?

### The Meaning of Virtue

<sup>1</sup> Roger Crisp, ‘Virtue Ethics’ in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* edited by Edward Craig (New York: Routledge, 1998) 622

According to Aristotle, “virtues are dispositions of character acquired by ethical training displayed not just in action but in patterns of emotional reaction”<sup>2</sup>. Aristotle agrees that virtues are not rigid habits but are flexible under the application of practical reason. He held that virtues (for which the word in his language means only “excellences”) had a teleological ground, in the sense that they represented the fullest development of a certain kind of natural creature, a non-defective made human being.

Aristotle distinguishes two kinds of virtues, namely: moral virtues and intellectual virtues. According to him, it is only by means of such virtues that human beings can reach their natural goal and achieve happiness. He puts it thus: “virtue too is distinguished into kinds in accordance with this difference (the difference between the rational and irrational parts of the soul); for we say that some of the virtues are intellectual and others moral, philosophical wisdom and understanding and practical wisdom being intellectual, liberality and temperance moral”<sup>3</sup>. Aristotle enumerates the following as moral virtues: courage, liberality, magnificence, pride, ambition, good temper, friendliness, truthfulness, ready wit, shame and justice<sup>4</sup>. For him, all these virtues are gained through habituation, states of character and means between extremes<sup>5</sup>.

In book vi, chapter three of his Ethics, Aristotle defines intellectual virtues as “those states by which we are able to possess truth. These States are five in number: art, scientific knowledge, practical wisdom, philosophic wisdom and intuitive reason”<sup>6</sup>. Aristotle is of the view that intellectual virtues are acquired through teaching and are marked by necessity. They do not concern matters that can change, and that is the reason why he does not include among them states of judgment and opinion.

So far, my intention here is to state the meaning of virtue and to show what qualify as a virtue as expressed by Aristotle. This we have been able to do. It is not our intention to go into details what Aristotle talks about virtue as a whole because it is not the focus of this article.

### Historical Overview of the Concept of Virtue

Historically speaking, there have been variations with regard to what is seen as the content of virtues.

For Plato, virtue is about being just, and reason plays a major role in the determination of what is just for oneself. He says, “once one identifies oneself with one’s reason, one will realize that being just is in fact best for oneself”<sup>7</sup>

Plato says a virtuous person is one who lives in conformity to certain rational principles reflecting his or her true interests while on the contrary, a person of vice lives under the influence of various destructive natural passions and appetites<sup>8</sup>. Thus, the basic tenet is that virtue is the rule of natural inclination by right reason, while vice is the ignorance of the true good that leads to the individual knowing no better than to act at the impulse of his or her irrational instincts and appetites.

In Plato’s *Republic* book four, Plato talks about four cardinal virtues, namely: wisdom, courage or fortitude, temperance and Justice. Wisdom is the virtue of the rational part of the soul; courage of the spirited part; while temperance consists in the union of the spirited and appetitive parts under the rule of reason. Justice is a general virtue consisting in this, that every part of the soul performs its proper task in due harmony<sup>9</sup>. It has to be noted that Plato never included *selfishness* in his list of virtues.

Aristotle’s basic idea which is original to him lies in the idea that virtue is not a kind of knowledge but a character-trait of the individual. His interest primarily lies in determining a set of personal attributes in terms of which human beings might be said to fulfil their proper function or realize their proper end *qua* human beings. Just as we

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 627

<sup>3</sup> Richard Mckeon (ed) *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941) 1103a3-6

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk V, Chpts 1-7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> James Delaney, *Rousseau and the Ethics of Virtue* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006)19

<sup>7</sup> Roger Crisp, ‘Virtue Ethics’ in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* edited by Edward Craig, 622

<sup>8</sup> Louis Caruana, *Science and Virtue: An Essay On the Impact of the Scientific Mentality on Moral Character* (USA: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006) 2

<sup>9</sup> Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Vol.1 Greece and Rome, part 1* (New York: Image Books, 1962)247

learn what a good horse is by observing and comparing actual horses in respect of the tasks we require of them, so learning about the virtue of humans is similarly a matter of observation and comparison.

According to Aristotle, virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, that is, the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom determines it<sup>10</sup>.

We have earlier on highlighted the distinction Aristotle made between moral virtues and intellectual virtues. In general, Aristotle understood virtue as a condition or state of a thing that enabled it to perform a designated task well<sup>11</sup> The primary sense of virtue in Greek was that of a functional excellence. The virtue of a knife is sharpness; the virtue of an eye is seeing clearly; the virtue of a judge is deciding cases impartially in accordance with law and equity, and the virtue of a human being, Aristotle thought, consisted in a certain activity of the soul in accordance with reason<sup>12</sup>.

Aristotle agrees with Plato in the list of virtues, but he considers prudence as the principle virtue in that prudence has to be applied in all that we do. He never saw selfishness as a virtue as against Ayn Rand who considers it a virtue.

Thomas Aquinas who notably developed Aristotle's account, of course modified it to accommodate Christianity, holding in particular that besides the moral virtues, there were *theological Virtues*. In other words, Aquinas introduced theological virtues which have God as their immediate object.

Like Aristotle, Aquinas talks about four cardinal virtues, which he says are habits of this sort, namely (a) prudence- which is reason's habit of good governance; (b) temperance- which is reason's restraint of self-serving concupiscence; (c) courage- which is reason's persevering despite self-serving 'irascible' passions such as fear; (d) justice- which is reason's governance of one's relations with others despite one's tendencies toward selfishness.

The theological virtues Aquinas added to the moral virtues according to him, are supreme and they include faith, hope and charity. These virtues cannot be acquired but must be directly 'infused' by God. Aquinas introduces these virtues and others in his *Summa Theologiae* and examines them in detail<sup>13</sup>

For Aquinas, the pagans were not in a position to display these theological virtues, but so far as moral virtues were concerned, they could be truly virtuous in the light of natural reason. However, there was still something imperfect about the virtue even at this level since Aquinas held the whole of ethical life is properly grounded in the virtue called charity, which has a divine origin<sup>14</sup>.

Thomas Hobbes talks about doctrine of the laws of nature. For him, laws of nature are not really the actions that conduce peace. In Hobbes's view, laws of nature are most satisfactorily thought of as moral virtues. To this end, Hobbes states:

All men agree on this, that peace is good; and therefore also the way or means of peace (which as I have showed before, are justice, gratitude, modesty, equity, mercy, and the rest of the laws of nature) are good (that is to say, moral virtues), and their contrary vices, evil. Now the science of virtue and vice is moral philosophy; and therefore the true doctrine of the laws of nature is true moral philosophy<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, W. D. Ross trans in R. Mckeon (ed) *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941) 1107a 1-3

<sup>11</sup> Peter Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 8

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, 1a IIae 49-88

<sup>14</sup> James Delaney, *Rousseau and the Ethics of Virtue*, 627

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994) chapter 16, p.100

For Hobbes, virtues are those qualities serving the end of peace, the role that Hobbes assigns to the sovereign in fostering his subjects' virtue and the virtue the sovereign requires to meet the demands of his role<sup>16</sup>. To this end, moral virtues for Hobbes, "are those qualities of mind and character that conduce to self-preservation- and hence the satisfaction of desire- by making peaceful existence possible"<sup>17</sup>.

Hobbes understands virtue exclusively in terms of an earthly and immediate goal, which is peace. Peace has a special status among ends, according to Hobbes, because it is the indispensable means to all other actually attainable ends. Peace for Hobbes, is "a rational and universal goal to which all men can in principle agree and to which most can be brought to give actual assent"<sup>18</sup>.

**John Locke** in his *Some Thought Concerning Education* defines virtue in terms of "overcoming the wrong judgments to which our immediate appetites incline us, and seeking to satisfy those desires of which reason approves"<sup>19</sup>. To achieve happiness or the satisfaction of desire, one must cultivate particular qualities of mind and character in order to place the passions under the guidance of reason.

Locke considers tolerance or toleration as a virtue. He says it is a virtue that is grounded in, or "agreeable to "both" the Gospel of Jesus Christ, "which has its end the care and salvation of men's souls, and "the genuine reason of mankind", which allows for differences of opinion about what leads to ultimate salvation"<sup>20</sup>.

There is a number of virtues that Locke considers, namely: Justice- he calls it great "social virtue"<sup>21</sup>. Courage or Fortitude- which is the guard and support of the other virtues, because it enables one to discharge one's duty and respect the dictates of reason despite the presence of danger and expectation of evils<sup>22</sup>.

Whereas for Aristotle, a man expressed courage in the primary sense of the term when he faced death nobly on the battle field<sup>23</sup>, Locke, in keeping with his tendency to understand virtue in terms of the gentleman's life (and in the process contributing to the democratization of virtue), stresses how courage is exercised off the battlefield and wherever human beings combat "pain, disgrace and poverty"<sup>24</sup>. And whereas Hobbes down-graded courage from a virtue to a passion and then down-graded courage further by grounding the moral virtues in the passion of fear, Locke sees that the exercise of even the more modest moral virtues can be called courage<sup>25</sup>.

Civility is also seen as a social virtue by Locke, which is the ability to put another at ease in conversation and dealings without flattery or servility"<sup>26</sup>. It is the general good will and regard for all people which makes anyone have a care not to show in his carriage any contempt, disrespect, or neglect of them, but to express, according to the fashion and way of that country, respect and value for them, according to their rank and condition<sup>27</sup>.

Civility in Locke's view, combines respect for the dignity of individuals with knowledge of convention and circumstance. It requires finely calibrated practical judgment about the varying ways in which respect is showed another<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism*, 39

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law in Human Nature and De Corpore Politico*, J.C.A. Gaskin (ed), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 98-99

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapter 15, p. 100

<sup>19</sup> John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education and of the Conduct of the Understanding*, Ruth W. Grant & Nathan Tarcov (eds) (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1996) \$33. P. 25

<sup>20</sup> John Locke, *Letter Concerning Toleration*, John Horton & Susan Mendus (eds), (New York: Routledge, 1991) 16

<sup>21</sup> John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, 82

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 85-90

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1115a25-1115b5

<sup>24</sup> John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, 86

<sup>25</sup> Peter Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism*, 103-104

<sup>26</sup> John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, 107

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Peter Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism*, 104

As with liberality, justice, courage, and civility, so too with industry, thrift, truthfulness and the other moral virtues that Locke expounds; all are affirmed by Locke because they place reasonable restraint on desire and contribute to happiness by enabling men to live together in peace and prosperity.

It is important to note that with regard to what constitute virtue, Locke never made mention of 'selfishness' as among the list of virtues. In other words, 'selfishness' is never a virtue for Locke.

**Immanuel Kant** says "the true shape" of virtue is a mental disposition untouched by any contingent empirical ground, to respect of the moral law<sup>29</sup>. Virtue or "a morally good attitude of mind" is for Kant equivalent to dignity<sup>30</sup>. Genuine or true virtue is exercised in, and dignity so defined stems from the activity of respecting the moral law by giving to oneself universal laws<sup>31</sup>. This is autonomy, and although Kant insists that evil actions are in a sense free<sup>32</sup>. It is only in acting out of respect for the moral law that one is free in the full sense.

In his *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant understands by virtue only that which serves a moral end and perfects the highest or best part of us, our rational nature<sup>33</sup>. Virtue is necessary because, as rational beings, who are also finite and situated in the natural world, human beings are constantly tempted, even while recognizing its authority, to break the moral law<sup>34</sup>. According to Kant, since executing the moral law because it is the moral law involves a perpetual struggle to resist and conquer powerful passions, virtue is "moral strength of the will"<sup>35</sup>. Such strength is expressed through qualities of mind and character that enable one to subdue the inclinations deflecting one from taking the concept of duty as the incentive for carrying out the moral law<sup>36</sup>.

Also, it is expressed in qualities enabling one to perform actions that respect humanity in oneself and in others. Just like in the works of Hobbes and Locke, according to Kant, the virtues can be seen or understood as the qualities that enable human beings to act in accordance with the dictates of reason for Kant are laws of morality and not prudence<sup>37</sup>.

Clarifying the difference between his own understanding of virtue and the traditional or Aristotelian understanding, Kant insists that virtue is not mere habit or aptitude but, rather, a set of inner dispositions rooted in firm, reflectively held, and purified principles<sup>38</sup>. In essence, for Kant, virtue means 'genuine virtue', and genuine virtue means purity of motive in the performance of the moral law.

**John Stuart Mill** like Aristotle sees virtue as an irreducible feature of morality and politics. Mill however, differs with Aristotle over such matters as the status of specific virtues, the ends of a good life and the goal of politics. For Mill, virtue consists in those qualities of mind and character which conduce to human happiness<sup>39</sup>.

Mill's thinking with regard to virtue connects to Hobbes, Locke and Kant on the important point that virtue is indispensable because human beings are prone to making wrong judgments about what lies in their long term or reasonably understood interest. Mill sees social virtues as those qualities of mind and character which support the observance of the basic general rules of justice that make social life possible<sup>40</sup>.

From the foregoing, we could see that so many philosophers across the various epochs, from ancient period to contemporary period dealt on the subject of 'virtue'. Some had varied opinions on the subject as has been highlighted above. In spite of the varying opinions of some the philosophers with regard to the concept of virtue,

<sup>29</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H.J. Paton (New York: Harper and Row, 1964)426

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 435

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 435-36

<sup>32</sup> Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960) 15-39

<sup>33</sup> Peter Berkowitz, 119

<sup>34</sup> Kant, 'Doctrine of Virtue' in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, 379

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 405-406

<sup>36</sup> Peter Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism*, 119-120

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 120

<sup>38</sup> Kant, 'Doctrine of Virtue' in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, 383-384

<sup>39</sup> Peter Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism*, 148

<sup>40</sup> James S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* chapter 5. P. 255-259

they are generally agreed on the fact that virtue remains an excellence of character and a quality one needs to possess to live a good moral life. That is why the definition of virtue given by Peter Lombard has served as the major starting point for much philosophical work through many centuries. He states thus: “virtus est bona qualitas mentis, qua recte vivitur, qua nullus male utitur, quam Deus in nobis sine nobis operator” (Virtues are good qualities of mind which dispense us to live rightly, which we cannot misuse, and which God works in us without our help)<sup>41</sup>. Why then did Ayn Rand make a paradigm shift and considered selfishness as a virtue?

### Ayn Rand's affirmation of 'Selfishness' as a Virtue

Before we delve into detail how Ayn Rand justifies 'selfishness' as a virtue, it is necessary to briefly state in general the philosophy of Rand which she calls **objectivism**.

### Objectivism of Ayn Rand

The name “objectivism” derives from the idea that human knowledge and values are objective; in that they exist and are determined by the nature of reality, to be discovered by one's mind, and are not created by the thoughts one has. What it means is that reality influences it. Rand depicts objectivism as a philosophy for living on earth, grounded in reality, and aimed at defining human nature and the nature of the world in which we live. She asserts thus: “my philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity and reason as his only absolute”<sup>42</sup>

In summary, Rand captures her philosophy thus: “my philosophy, objectivism holds that: (a) Reality exists as an objective absolute- facts are facts, independent of man's feelings, wishes, hopes or fears. (b) Reason (the faculty which identifies and integrates the material provided by man's sense) is man's only means of perceiving reality, his only source of knowledge, his only guide to action, and his basic means of survival. (c) Man- everyman- is an end in himself, not the means to the ends of others. He must exist for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself. The pursuit of his own rational self-interest and of his own happiness is the highest moral purpose of his life. (d) The ideal political-economic system is *laissez-capitalism*. It is a system where men deal with one another, not as victims and executioners, nor as masters and slaves, but as traders, by free voluntary exchange to mutual benefit. It is a system where no man may obtain any values from others by resorting to physical force, and no man may initiate the use of physical force against others. The government acts only as policeman that protects man's right; it uses physical force only in retaliation and only against those who initiate its use, such as criminals or foreign invaders. In a system of full capitalism, there should be (but historically, has not yet been) a complete separation of state and economics in the same way and for the same reasons as the separation of state and church<sup>43</sup>.

We can see that in the above definition, Rand briefly captures the concept of objectivism in the various branches of philosophy, namely: metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and politics respectively.

### Objectivist concept of Virtue

A virtue in the objectivist definition is “the action by which one gains and keeps a value”<sup>44</sup>. The action in this instance- the virtue that develops, preserves, and applies the faculty of reason, thereby making possible every other human value- is rationality<sup>45</sup>.

Rationality in Rand's view, is “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”<sup>46</sup>. What this entails is that there is the application of reason in every aspect of one's life and concerns. It also means choosing and validating one's love, in accordance with the

<sup>41</sup> Petri Lombardi, *Libri iv Sententiarum* ( Florence: Ad Clares Aquas Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventura, 1916) Book II chapter 27, section 5

<sup>42</sup> Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Random House, 1957) 10

<sup>43</sup> Ayn Rand, 'Introducing Objectivism' in *The Objectivist Newsletter*, August, 1962 (San Diego: Second Renaissance Books, 1991) 35

<sup>44</sup> Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, 939

<sup>45</sup> Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Meridian Books, 1991) 221

<sup>46</sup> Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: Penguin Books Ltd, 1964) 25

normal requirements of a cognitive process, the requirements of logic, objectivity, integration<sup>47</sup>. Put negatively, virtue means never placing any consideration above one's perception of reality. This includes never attempting to get away with a contradiction, a mystic fantasy, or an indulgence in context-dropping<sup>48</sup>.

In addition, virtue in objectivist understanding consists in creating values, not in giving them away<sup>49</sup>. What this means is that you may and should help another person, or befriend him or love him, if in the full context your values, your judgment, your life- are upheld thereby and protected. The principle of your action must be selfish Rand asserts<sup>50</sup>.

Rand affirms that rationality is the primary obligation of man and all other virtues are derivatives of it. If man needs to choose his actions by reference to principles, rationality names the root principle. To act on principle is itself an expression of rationality; it is a form of being governed by one's conceptual faculty<sup>51</sup>.

In her *Atlas Shrugged* Rand defines six major derivatives of the virtue of rationality. Even though they may not be exhaustive, Rand says they constitute the minimum moral knowledge required by a man if he seeks to follow reason consistently, as a matter of principle, in the choices he makes daily as well as his actions. These six derivatives include: independence, integrity, honesty, justice, productiveness and pride.

### Rand's Ethics

Ayn Rand defines ethics as that "branch of philosophy that provides 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"<sup>52</sup>. From the point of objectivism, such a code has to deal with three basic questions that are interrelated: for what end should man live? By what fundamental principle should he act in order to achieve this end? Who should profit from his actions?

In Rand's view, as expressed by Leonard Peikoff (Rand's disciple) the answers to these questions define the ultimate value, the primary virtue and the particular beneficiary upheld by an ethical code and reveal thereby its essence<sup>53</sup>. Peikoff says the objectivist position can be indicated in three words: the ultimate value is life; the primary virtue is rationality, the proper beneficiary is oneself<sup>54</sup>.

### Rand's Concept of Value

Ayn Rand defines 'value' as "that which one acts to gain and/or keep. Value denotes the object of an action: it is that which some entity's action is directed to acquiring or preserving"<sup>55</sup>. According to Rand, the concept of 'value' implies specific preconditions. Value 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<sup>56</sup>.

Rand enumerates the cardinal values of objectivist ethics through which man can realize one's ultimate value (one's own life), namely: Reason, Purpose, self-esteem; with their corresponding virtues as rationality, productiveness and pride.

<sup>47</sup> Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, 221

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 239

<sup>50</sup> Ibid

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 221-222

<sup>52</sup> Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 13

<sup>53</sup> Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, 207

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

<sup>55</sup> Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 15

<sup>56</sup> Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 15

Rand singles out productive work as the central purpose of a rational man's life. It is the central value that integrates and determines the hierarchy of all his other values. Reason is the source, the precondition of his productive work while pride is the result<sup>57</sup>.

For Rand, living organisms are the entities that make possible "value". They are the entities capable of self-generated, goal-directed action- because they are the conditional entities, which face alternative of life or death. They are thus the only kind of entities that can (and must) pursue values<sup>58</sup>.

By the very nature of 'value' according to Rand, any code of values must hold life as the ultimate value. And all of the objectivist ethics and politics rest on this principle<sup>59</sup>. Thus Rand asserts that "it is only the concept of 'life' that makes the concept of 'value' possible<sup>60</sup>. This entails that without life there will be no value. Thus, remaining alive is the goal of values and of all proper action<sup>61</sup>. This is what objectivism is all about in the context of ethics.

This will be the basis for Rand's assertion that selfishness is a virtue and consequently, attacking the ethics of altruism.

### Rand's Exaltation of Selfishness as a Virtue

Ayn Rand talks about "virtue of selfishness' and the question people ask Rand is: 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 she means? Rand gives an answer to those who ask thus" "for the reason that makes you afraid of it"<sup>62</sup>.

Ayn Rand contends that 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<sup>63</sup>. Rand states that in common parlance, the term 'selfishness' is a synonym of evil; the image it portrays 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<sup>64</sup>.

However, Rand takes to the dictionary and says that the exact meaning of the word 'selfishness' is concern with one's own interests. According to Rand then, 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. She avers that it is the task of ethics to answer such questions.

We can see that is based on the dictionary meaning of the term 'selfishness' that Rand sees it as a virtue, and as such totally condemns altruism as a virtue.

In objectivist context, selfishness is not an innate weakness but a rare strength. It is the achievement of remaining true to one's own life and one's own mind"<sup>65</sup>. Rand is of the view that this is not something to be taken for granted or cursed. Rather, it is something that is supposed to be learned, taught, nurtured, praised and enshrined<sup>66</sup>.

When Rand talks about selfishness as a virtue, she focuses basically on what she terms *rational selfishness*. Rational selfishness means:

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 21

<sup>58</sup> Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, 209

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 212

<sup>60</sup> Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, 939

<sup>61</sup> Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, 213

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 1

<sup>63</sup> Ibid

<sup>64</sup> Ibid

<sup>65</sup> Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, 239

<sup>66</sup> Ibid



“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<sup>67</sup>

It is the conviction of objectivist ethics that human good does not require human sacrifices and cannot be achieved by the sacrifice of anyone to anyone<sup>68</sup>.

To be selfish in Rand’s view is to hold and pursue meaningful, life enhancing values. She gives examples: if a man were to be truly unselfish, and actually attempt to practice a self-sacrifice code, then he would have to renounce his personal values; the more urgent the value(s) he surrendered, the more “noble” his sacrifice would be considered. So, for example, if a young man surrenders the woman he loves to satisfy his mother’s expectations, by these standards he is virtuous; if he additionally relinquishes career aspirations, his own apartment, and an independent life to stay home and care for her, the conventional code deems him even more ‘saintly’. But after sacrificing his love, his career, and his autonomy, his life will be empty, drained of personal meaning, filled with only resentment and bitterness<sup>69</sup>.

Selfishness, in its proper sense, according to Rand involves a commitment to one’s self. The deeper question therefore is: what fundamentally, is man’s self? Rand’s answer is: “at one level, his values, the things he considers most important, at a deeper level, his mind- the thinking he performed in identifying and choosing those values<sup>70</sup>. Thus, selfishness according to Rand is adherence to one’s own values and mind.

When a man is true, in action, to his supreme values, it is his self that he honours above all. This is selfishness in Ayn Rand’s sense of the word. The selfish man is he who meets two criteria: (a) he holds principles and forms values that will, in fact, lead to his long-term wellbeing- he is not self-destructive and (b) he remains consistently true to his life- promoting ideas in practice<sup>71</sup>. This according to Rand, nothing less and nothing else is loyalty to the self. She goes on then to attack altruism.

### Ayn Rand’s Criticism of Altruism

Before going into Rand’s attack of altruism, we have to in the first place, briefly state the meaning of the term ‘altruism. In other words, what is altruism?

### Meaning of Altruism

Looking at altruism from the context of human behaviour, it takes its roots from the Latin word *alter-* which means “other”. It concerns the place of the other in moral experience, especially when the other is in need<sup>72</sup>. The intention of an altruist is to act for the sake of the other as an end in itself instead of as a means to public recognition or internal well-being, although such benefits to self need not be resisted<sup>73</sup>.

When it comes to altruism, *Solipsism* (the view that the self is all that exists or can be known) is transcended. What it means is that the self no longer perceives self as the only center of worth and no longer perceives worth in others only to the extent that they contribute to egoistic interests<sup>74</sup>.

<sup>67</sup> Andrew Bernstein, *Objectivism in One Lesson: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, (Maryland: Hamilton Books, 2008) 27

<sup>68</sup> Ibid

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 13

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 14

<sup>71</sup> Andrew Bernstein, *Objectivism in One Lesson*, 17

<sup>72</sup> Stephen G. Post, et al (eds), *Altruism and Altruistic Love: Science, Philosophy & Religion in Dialogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 3

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>74</sup> Ibid

Altruism is widely esteemed and commonly seen as a foundation of moral life when its practice goes beyond biological relations and is not done to be reciprocated. However, altruism cannot be taken to imply the total eclipse of self-concern or a quest for self-immolation. Altruism is seen as a source of perennial fascination across cultures when it is fully expressed, which include significant self-sacrifice in the aid of strangers or even enemies.

Regardless of its duration, intensity, emotional engagement, sacrifice, and extensivity, the common feature of altruism is affirmation of and care for “the other as other”<sup>75</sup>. Altruism in its broadest sense then, means promoting the interests of the other<sup>76</sup>. Again, Kristen Renwick Monroe, in her book *The Heart of Altruism*, defines altruism as “action designed to benefit another, even at the risk of significant harm to the actor’s own well-being”<sup>77</sup>.

Explaining further the above definition, Kristen brings out certain crucial points. She says the following: (a) altruism must entail action; (b) the action must be goal-directed, although this may be either conscious or reflexive; (c) the goal of the act must be to further the welfare of another. If another’s welfare is treated as an unintended or secondary consequence of behaviour designed primarily to further my own welfare, the act is not altruistic; (d) intentions count more than consequences. If I try to do something nice to you, and it ends up badly or with long-term negative consequences for you, this does not diminish the altruism of my initial action. Most analysts now consider motivation and intent critical, even though motives and intent are difficult to establish, observe, and measure objectively; (e) the act must carry some possibility of diminution of in my welfare. An act that improves both my own welfare and that of another person would not be altruistic but would fall instead into the category of collective welfare; (f) altruism sets no conditions, its purpose is to further the welfare of another person or group, without anticipation of reward for the altruist<sup>78</sup>.

The above explanation of altruism does not set limits as to the targets of the altruistic act. In other words, the act is altruistic irrespective of the recipient. This is altruism per se.

### Rand’s attack of Altruism

Rand attacks altruism as a virtue thus:

The ethics of altruism has created the image of the brute, as its answer, in order to make men accept two inhuman tenets: (a) that any concern with one’s own interests is evil, regardless of what these interests might be, and (b) that the brute’s activities are in fact to one’s own interest (which altruism enjoins man to renounce for the sake of his neighbours<sup>79</sup>

Furthermore, Rand says there are two moral questions which altruism lumps together into one ‘package deal’ (a) what are values? (b) who should be the beneficiary of values? Altruism Rand says substitutes the second for the first, it evades the task of defining a code of moral values, thus leading man, in fact, without moral guidance. According to Rand, altruism declares that any action taken for the benefit of others is good, and any action taken for one’s own benefit is evil. Thus the beneficiary of an action is the only criterion of moral value; and so long as that beneficiary is anybody other than oneself, anything goes.

Rand totally disagrees with the above notion because according to her, it brings about so many evil acts. She captures her reasons for saying so thus: “hence the appalling immorality, the chronic injustice, the grotesque double standards, the insoluble conflicts and contradictions that have characterized human relationships and human societies throughout history, under all the variants of the altruist ethics”<sup>80</sup>.

Ayn Rand buttresses the above assertion by asking us to observe the indecency of what passes for moral judgments today: an industrialist who produces a fortune and a gangster who robs a bank are regarded as equally

<sup>75</sup> Ibid

<sup>76</sup> Nial Scott & Jonathan Seglow, *Altruism* (England: Open University Press, 2007) 1

<sup>77</sup> Kristen R. Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) 4

<sup>78</sup> Kristen R. Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism*, 6-7

<sup>79</sup> Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 1

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 6

immoral, since they both sought wealth for their own “selfish” benefit. A young man who gives up his career in order to support his parents and never rises beyond the rank of grocery clerk is regarded as morally superior to the young man who endures an excruciating struggle and achieves his personal ambition.

Rand gives further example: a dictator is regarded as moral, since the unspeakable atrocities he committed were intended to benefit “the people” not himself. Rand tells us here to observe what this beneficiary- criterion of morality does to a man’s life. The first thing he learns is that morality is his enemy; he has nothing to gain from it; he can only lose; self-inflicted loss, self-inflicted pain and the gray, debilitating pall of an incomprehensible duty is all that he can expect<sup>81</sup>.

In addition, Rand says “since nature does not provide man with an automatic form of survival, since he has to support his life by his own effort, the doctrine that “concern for one’s own interests is evil means that man’s desire to live is evil; that man’s life, as such, is evil. No doctrine could more evil than that<sup>82</sup>. This according to Rand 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. It means altruism permits no view of men except as sacrificial animals and profiteers-on-sacrifice, as victims and parasites- that permit no concept of a benevolent co-existence among men- that it permits no concept of justice<sup>83</sup>.

Continuing, Rand says to rebel against so devastating an evil, one has to rebel against its basic premise. To redeem both man and morality, it is the concept of “selfishness” that one has to redeem. And the first step to redeem the concept of selfishness is to assert man’s right to a moral existence- that is, to recognize his need of a moral code to guide the course and the fulfilment of his own life. The reasons why man needs a moral code will tell you that the purpose of morality is to define man’s proper values and interests, that concern with his own interests is the essence of a moral existence, and that man must be the beneficiary of his own actions.

Rand contends that morality is not a contest of whims. So man’s self-interest cannot be determined by blind desires or random whims, but must be discovered and achieved by the guidance of rational principles. This is why Rand says, the objectivist ethics is a morality of a rational self-interest- or of a rational selfishness. She asserts thus:

Since selfishness is concern with one’s own interests, the objectivist ethics uses the concept in its exact and purest sense. It is not a concept that one can surrender to enemies, not to the unthinking misconceptions, distortions, prejudices and fears of the ignorant and the irrational.....the attack on selfishness is an attack on man’s self-esteem; to surrender one is to surrender the other<sup>84</sup>

For Rand, ethical egoism is the only ethical philosophy that respects the integrity of the individual human life. She regarded the ethics of altruism as a “totally destructive idea, both in society as a whole and in the lives of individuals taken in by it<sup>85</sup>.

When we advocate for altruism, the life of a selfless service, Ayn Rand asks as follows:

Why is it moral to serve the happiness of others, but not your own? if enjoyment is a value, why is it moral when experienced by others, but immoral when experienced by you?...why is it immoral for you to desire, but moral for others to do so? Why is it immoral to produce a value and keep it, but moral to give it away? And if it is not moral for you to keep a value, why is it moral for

<sup>81</sup> Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 6

<sup>82</sup> Ibid

<sup>83</sup> Ibid

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 8

<sup>85</sup> James Rachel, ‘Ethical Egoism’ in *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Edited by Russ Shafer-Landau (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013) 195

others to accept it? If you are selfless and virtuous when you give it, are they not selfish and vicious when they take it? Does virtue consist of serving vice?<sup>86</sup>

Ayn Rand does not agree with the answer given to these questions. For her it is irrational to accept to live such a life.

For Rand, life requires that man gain values and not lose them. It requires assertive action, achievement, success, not abnegation, renunciation, surrender. It requires self-tending; in other words, the exact opposite of sacrifice<sup>87</sup>. A rational man she says, however, chooses his values and their hierarchical ranking not by whim, but by a process of cognition. To tell such a man to surrender his values is to tell him “surrender your judgement, contradict your knowledge, sacrifice your mind. But this is something a man dare not sacrifice<sup>88</sup>.

Rand holds that man’s life is not compatible with sacrifice, either of oneself or of another person. She writes: “the rational man rejects masochism and sadism, submission and domination, the making of sacrifices and the collecting of them. What he upholds and creates is a self-sufficient ego<sup>89</sup>.

Again, Rand criticizes altruism in the sense that altruism makes the choice of the beneficiary of moral values as a major criterion for morality, but she says it is only a mere preliminary or introductory issue in the field of morality. It cannot be a substitute for morality, neither can it be a criterion of moral value, unlike altruism that has taken it to be so. She concludes by that saying that it cannot be a moral primary, in that it has to be derived from and validated by the fundamental premises of a moral system<sup>90</sup>.

Finally, Rand’s attack on altruism is very vehement when she says:

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<sup>91</sup>

Altruism for Rand does not only demand the surrender of values- that which brings meaning to a man’s life, it equally requires the surrender of the mind, the source of his values, and this is worse. By analogy, altruism does not merely dig up flourishing plants by their roots; it poisons the soil in which they grow, rendering impossible the flowering of robust life<sup>92</sup>. It is based on this background that Rand advocated for selfishness.

### Critique of Ayn Rand’s Position

Here, I have tried to critically analyze Rand’s position with regard to her affirmation of ‘selfishness’ as a virtue as well as her denigration of altruism in her objectivist ethics.

### Positive Influence of Rand’s Position

When we take a look at the political arena across the world today, there is no doubt that Ayn Rand’s objectivist philosophy still has a great influence on how various governments are run, especially the ones that run a capitalist system of government. In other words, Rand’s objectivist views permeate most of the political structures practised across the world today. A typical example of such countries where Rand’s views have had an influence is the United States of America. This can be said to be a credit to Rand and her objectivist philosophy. That is why

<sup>86</sup> Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, 1057

<sup>87</sup> Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, 232

<sup>88</sup> Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, 953

<sup>89</sup> Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead*, 25<sup>th</sup> anniv. ed., (New York: Random House, 1968) 606-609

<sup>90</sup> Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 8

<sup>91</sup> Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 30

<sup>92</sup> Andrew Bernstein, *Objectivism in One Lesson*, 18

Andrew Bernstein states thus: “the literary and philosophical genius of Ayn Rand must be acknowledged. Her ideas can and will change the world immensely for the better”<sup>93</sup>.

Again, Rand’s insistence on reason as the absolute, if followed, enables everyone to think and be productive in their own capacity as human beings and not rely on anyone to survive. What it means is that it enables one to be creative and independent thus removing the burden of being a parasite to anyone as far as survival is concerned.

### Flaws of Rand’s Position

It is obvious that there are some flaws when it comes to Rand’s position with regard to her insistence that selfishness is a virtue. We look at these flaws one after another.

### Fear of Religion

One fundamental flaw of Rand is that she presumes everyone should be like her, no religious attachment or affiliation to a supreme being (God). But this is not the case in reality. This aspect of the human person which Rand vehemently denounces prompts one to be altruistic, and this is where she misses the point. It has to be made clear that man by nature is *homo-religiosus* (man by nature is religious). There is always an appeal to a higher being (God) and this shapes his conduct in relation with other persons and the universe. In other words, Rand as an atheist spoke from her own worldview and considered it to be the norm for everyone. But everyone is not an atheist like herself. Consequently, her views are perhaps limited and do not and may not apply to everyone.

There are so many people who have a different worldview from Rand’s, for example, the theists. Rand’s view is simply an overgeneralization, which is a fallacy. Her atheistic position cannot override that of the theists who hold a contrary view from hers. It is perhaps, based on this ground that Scot Ryan writes:

Rand’s own commitment to atheism seems to have warped her thought at several crucial points. At the very least, it seems clear that she was at some pains to rid philosophy of just those points that smacked of “religion” in the sense Nagel describes. And, importantly, she would not have accepted Meynell’s remarks as presenting a genuine dichotomy between “intricism” and “subjectivism”: she thought she had found a Third Way, which she called “objectivism”<sup>94</sup>

Ryan Scot gives two reasons to substantiate the above, which is noted in the debate between William Lane Craig and Michael Tooley:

God provides the best explanation for the objective moral values in the world. If God does not exist, then objective moral values do not exist. Many theists and atheists alike concur on this point.... The question here is not: Must we believe in God in order to live a moral life? I’m not claiming that we must. Nor is the question: Can we recognize objective moral values without believing in God? I think we can. Rather, the question is: if God does not exist, do objective moral values exist? ...I just don’t see any reason to think that in the absence of God the morality evolved by Homo Sapiens is objective.... On the atheistic view, same action, say, rape, may not be socially advantageous and so in the course of human development has become taboo. But that does absolutely nothing to prove that rape is really morally wrong. On the atheistic view, if you can escape the social consequences, there is nothing really wrong with your raping someone. And thus without God there is no absolute right and wrong which imposes itself on our conscience. The fact is that objective values do

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., preface ix

<sup>94</sup> Scot Ryan, *Objectivism and the Corruption of Rationality: A Critique of Ayn Rand’s Epistemology* (New York: Writers Club Press, 2003) 10

exist, and we all know it... But if objective values do exist, then it follows logically and inescapably that God exists<sup>95</sup>

We can actually see that someone with this kind of intent will not see anything good in religion and will go to every length to deny God and the importance of His role with regard to human beings and the universe. This is what Rand mistakenly did.

One can easily say with regard to the assertions of Rand that she has absolutized man to the height of God, and as such to be worshipped. It is based on this that Scot writes:

the object of objectivist worship is “man *qua* man”. And in its actual application, this principle entails the “worship” of particular human beings who embody, or appear to embody, the specifically Randian virtues-human beings no greater than whom can be conceived and who answer to no standard higher than that of their own marvelous and self-generated “nature”<sup>96</sup>

However, man is fallible and as such cannot be the standard and as a result, cannot be worshipped. One can actually say the atheistic tendencies of Rand pushed her too far to make wrong assumptions.

According to Rand, “God is not a concept. It is an isolation of actual characteristics of man combined with the projection of impossible, irrational characteristics which do not arise from reality”<sup>97</sup>. Rand is convinced that objectivism means atheism, and for some objectivists, atheism is one of the central attractions of her philosophical outlook<sup>98</sup>. In other words, atheism is the driving force of her philosophy. This is because at every point at which Rand faces a philosophical choice between a more reasonable position that seems to entail or suggest theism, and a less reasonable position that seems to avoid it, she almost invariably chooses the latter<sup>99</sup>. Thus one can say that this path Rand has chosen has perhaps, to a great extent affected and undermined her philosophical judgment and convictions.

Ayn Rand decided to be an atheist at the age of thirteen as Barbara Branden reports in *Who is Ayn Rand?* Branden gives two reasons as to why Rand decided to be an atheist, namely: (a) there are no reasons to believe in God, there is no proof of the belief; (b) that the concept of God is insulting and degrading to man- it implies that the highest possible is not to be reached by man, that he is an inferior being who can only worship an ideal he will never achieve... she rejected the concept of God as morally evil<sup>100</sup>.

In her letters, Rand writes:

I am an atheist and I have only one religion: the sublime in human nature. There is nothing to approach the sanctity of the highest type of man possible and there is nothing that gives me the same reverent feeling, the feeling when one’s spirit wants to kneel, bareheaded...it is a kind of strange and improbable white heat where admiration becomes religion, and religion becomes philosophy, and philosophy- the whole of one’s life<sup>101</sup>

It is based on the above assertion of Rand that Scot says that Rand’s philosophy has been skewed by the combination of her antipathy toward theism and her desire to retain some of the consequences of a traditional Western-religious worldview in her own atheism-centered philosophy. Our thesis...is that Rand has tried –

<sup>95</sup> William Lane Craig, in William Lane Craig and Tooley, *A Classic Debate on the Existence of God*, November 1994, University of Colorado at Butler

<sup>96</sup> Scot Ryan, *Objectivism and the Corruption of Rationality*, 351

<sup>97</sup> Ayn Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, 148

<sup>98</sup> Scot Ryan, *Objectivism and the Corruption of Rationality*, 256

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 256

<sup>100</sup> Barbara Branden, *Who is Ayn Rand?* 162

<sup>101</sup> Ayn Rand, *Letters of Ayn Rand*, 15-16

unsuccessfully- to develop a philosophy which, in effect, holds that ‘there is no God, and man is made in His image’<sup>102</sup>. This is actually a contradiction in terms and as such, a fallacy.

### Ayn Rand’s False Dichotomy between Egoism and Altruism

It is really difficult to defend the odd position of Rand on altruism. On the contrary, Thomas Nagel talks about “rational altruism” as has been stated earlier on in this work. Thomas Nagel had said altruism does not mean abject self-sacrifice, but merely a willingness to act in consideration of the interests of others without having ulterior motives. Talking about the ability and tendency to be motivated directly by the well-being of persons other than oneself, which is the base of both justice and benevolence.

According to Rand, “a rational man never holds a desire which cannot be achieved by his own effort” and never so much as “desires the unearned”<sup>103</sup>. Scot Ryan holds a contrary opinion. He sees some flaw in Rand’s view. It is flawed not because it is too rigorous- its rigor is a matter more of appearance than of substance- but because it is just misconceived<sup>104</sup>. Scot writes: “if the mere possession of a desire that requires the help of others is a sign of irrationality, if it is irrational even to want something that one has not “earned” (whatever that means), then any of us who wants to be “rational” had better get busy rooting out any such “desires” so that we, too, may be independent Randian heroes”<sup>105</sup>. Scot sees this view as not right because there is nothing irrational in a willingness to depend on other people’s help. Again, Scot would say that there is nothing irrational in a willingness to accept “unearned” benefits unlike Rand<sup>106</sup>.

I agree with Scot with regard to his assertion above. What does Rand have to say about internally displaced persons who are being helped by some charity organizations or individuals with material and medical needs? Are they irrational because they have not earned what they have received? I doubt if they are irrational by receiving the “unearned” according to Rand.

Furthermore, I have got to agree with Scot Ryan when he says, “there is nothing irrational in relying on one’s emotions as at least a tentative guide to what one’s “interests” really are in the first place. People who genuinely value one another, who want one another to do well and feel good, do not need, and may even be positively harmed by, Rand’s ill-conceived, falsely rigorous standard of “rationality”<sup>107</sup>. One can see that the failure of Rand has consequences that permeate the rest of her philosophy, her economic theory not excluded.

Again, what Rand’s objectivist ethics misses is the recognition that one person’s well-being may be another person’s value just because it is seen to be “good’ in the sense we have here described- that is, as the fulfillment of some aim or end of a sentient agent<sup>108</sup>.

In opposition to Rand’s view, Walter Goodnow Everett, in his book *Moral Values* writes thus:

It is because the self is capable of including within its own interests the interests of others that altruism is possible. Some degree of it, indeed, may be said to be inevitable. Once it is seen that the self is a social self, the sharp opposition between egoism and altruism breaks down. The antithesis, if pressed too far, loses all meaning, since no individual can realize his personal interests without including more or less fully the interests of others<sup>109</sup>

I do agree with Walter’s views as expressed above.

<sup>102</sup> Scot Ryan, *Objectivism and the Corruption of Rationality*, 272

<sup>103</sup> Ayn Rand, *Virtue of Selfishness*, 60

<sup>104</sup> Scot Ryan, *Objectivism and the Corruption of Rationality*, 320

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 321

<sup>106</sup> Ibid

<sup>107</sup> Scot Ryan, *Objectivism and the Corruption of Rationality*, 322

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 323

<sup>109</sup> Walter G. Everett, *Moral Values*, 234

In addition, it is absolutely possible that the well-being of another person is what I want or my interest. It is on this basis that Peter Fuss writes:

What the self-realizationist wishes to emphasize is that any voluntary, deliberate, responsible act on the part of a human agent is prompted by his self-conscious awareness for something that he wants- but not necessarily something he wants merely for his own sake, or private advantage. Properly speaking, the difference between the egoist and the altruist is not that the former aims at self-satisfaction whereas the latter does not. Rather, it is that the former tends to find his satisfaction in one class of objects- namely, those that will further his private advantage or provide him with personal pleasure- while the latter tends to find self-satisfaction in a different class of objects- namely, those that will give others pleasure or contribute to their well-being. In each case there is dissatisfaction by a will to alter that state of affairs with an eye to removing the source of the dissatisfaction. But it is only when one's effort to remove one's dissatisfaction knowingly involves placing personal advantage over the welfare of others that the desire in question can be called egoistic<sup>110</sup>

To this end, Scot is of the view (and I agree with him) that a realistic view of universals allows us to maintain that our experiences are not separate, island existents but part of an overarching whole among which genuine identities may hold. On such an account, a self can quite literally include the interests of others among its own<sup>111</sup>.

However, Rand does not see it like that, because for her, it seems that the self is not capable of including within its own interests the interests of others. Rand does not think that a healthy self can or should find satisfaction in contributing to the well-being of another person, not unless that person already serves self's own "life" or "interests" in some other, logically prior manner. For Rand, it is only in an emergency situation that one could volunteer to help strangers<sup>112</sup>. But Rand forgets that it is not only in emergency cases that other people do require help.

### Ayn Rand's Moral Standard as an Illusion

For the objectivist (Rand being the Protagonist), "the standard of value " or the standard by which one judges what is **good** or evil as we indicated earlier on, is man's life or that which is required for man's survival *qua* man. However, in Scot's view objectivism simply fails to provide any moral standard at all, and it is for this reason that one may say that objectivism is an illusion of a moral standard<sup>113</sup>. I tend to agree with Scot on this point. Scot Ryan goes further to say that:

objectivism is anti-religious (we have stated this earlier) and as such rejects not only literal theism but even what we might call "virtual theism": the possibility of a "God's eye-view" in either ethics or epistemology, not only as a point of view occupied by a literal God, but even as a rationally-constructed ideal against which our progress might be gauged- and against which human beings might be measured and found wanting<sup>114</sup>

In her ethics, Rand writes: "since man must establish his own values, accepting a value above himself makes him low and worthless....The worship of something above you (like God) is an escape, a switch of responsibility to permit you anything"<sup>115</sup>. According to the tenets of objectivism which Rand champions, each value is relative to the purposes of an individual valuer (of whom there are billions, none of them answerable to a literal or figurative supreme valuer); each item of knowledge is relative to the purposes of a knower; and neither fact is supposed to

<sup>110</sup> Peter Fuss, *The Moral Philosophy of Josiah Royce* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965) 168-169

<sup>111</sup> Scot Ryan, *Objectivism and the Corruption of Rationality*, 324

<sup>112</sup> Ayn Rand, *Virtue of Selfishness*, 54

<sup>113</sup> Scot Ryan, *Objectivism and the Corruption of Rationality*, 353

<sup>114</sup> Ibid

<sup>115</sup> Ayn Rand, *Journals of Ayn Rand*, 284



make either values or knowledge less “objective”<sup>116</sup>. What this entails is that man becomes the measure of all things. Rand forgets here that man is full of imperfections.

To this end, Scot asserts that (I agree with him) objectivism explicitly discards any moral ideals that involve something other than the standard of one’s own life; there is, for objectivism, no “God’s eye view” from which to pronounce moral/ethical judgment on anyone or anything, favourable or unfavourable<sup>117</sup>. This is not correct because there would not be any one moral standard, in that there will be as many moral standards as there are many people in the world. And this is a dangerous path to tread as moral relativism will be the rule and norm. Ethical relativism of course, has its numerous flaws and ought not to be the standard for moral conduct.

### Ayn Rand’s Idolization of Autonomy

Ayn Rand places so much importance on autonomy and independence to the extent that she is convinced that an omnipotent God, by nature, would be a “totalitarian dictator”. The question is: why?

In Scot’s assessment, Rand’s argument here depends on an implicit assumption that carries us straight into the heart of her theory of value. According to Scot Ryan, Rand seems to presume that no values can be genuine values to someone who has not consciously chosen them. The analogy with her theory of concepts is direct; her strange idolatry of volition provides, in each case, both the name and the *raison detre* of her philosophy<sup>118</sup>. I align myself here with Scot’s view as opposed to that of Rand.

### The Theory of Value of Rand

The theory of values of Rand is parallel to her theory of concepts. She wishes to deny that there is such a thing as “intrinsic” value and yet to avoid the conclusion that value is “subjective”; she maintains that value is “objective” in approximately the same sense as are concepts<sup>119</sup>.

As earlier on stated, Rand sees “value” as anything that one acts to gain and/or keep. Like Ralph Barton (whose general theory of value defined the “good” as the object of any “interest” whatsoever), Rand will not allow that something is a “value” to someone unless that someone is in fact acting to gain and/or keep it<sup>120</sup>. However, unlike Perry, Rand does not identify “goodness” itself with being the actual object of an actual interest<sup>121</sup>.

By itself this account would allow for the possibility that not all ‘values’ are genuinely ‘good’, and indeed Rand supplements it with what purports to be an account of ‘goodness’- a standard that is, by which we can appraise what ‘values’ we ought to act to gain and/or keep<sup>122</sup>. Scot says this theory of Rand is not that plausible and I agree with him on this point.

Again, Scot sees Rand’s objectivist ethics as slipping into the sheerest subjectivism<sup>123</sup>. And he goes on to say this Rand’s assertion is true in two senses: (a) Rand sometimes holds that no value can be a value to anyone who has not consciously and deliberately chosen it<sup>124</sup>. Gregory R. Johnson noted this also in his excellent piece “*Liberty and Nature: The Missing Link*” in the first issue of the Journal of Ayn Rand studies.

If we follow Rand’s view consistently, in the case of an accident, someone is knocked down by a car, and is unconscious, but surgeries are performed on him by paramedics while he is unconscious. Does it mean that it is not a value since he is unconscious not until he wakes up and gets conscious of it then it becomes a value? This is highly improbable. Is it what Rand means that one has to be conscious of something before it can become a

<sup>116</sup> Scot Ryan, *Objectivism and the Corruption of Rationality*, 354

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 355

<sup>118</sup> Scot Ryan, *Objectivism and the Corruption of Rationality*, 287

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 287

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 295

<sup>124</sup> Scot Ryan, *Objectivism and the Corruption of Rationality*, 295

value? I do not think so. I say so because Rand holds that “values” cannot exist outside the full context of man’s life, needs, goals, and knowledge<sup>125</sup>.

Rand’s argument here does seem to clearly show that no genuine values can be achieved by “force” because all values depend on the rational-volitional appraisal- and therefore the conscious, voluntary cooperation of the one to whom they are supposed to be valuable<sup>126</sup>. Rand, one could say did not consider all contexts when she was making her assertion. She presumed that everyone has to be conscious all the time and yet this is not the case in reality. There are values that one gets even when one is not conscious of them. For instance, services rendered to accident victims by paramedics to gain back their health even when they are unconscious. The question here is: does one have to recognize a value retroactively? In that an unconscious person who has been treated and regains consciousness can now recognize as a value the services he/she received from the paramedics when he/she was unconscious?

### **Moral Obligations do not arise from the Choice to Live**

For Rand, the primary aim of a person is the choice “to live” and that is the only moral standard. And that is if one makes the choice positively. But the question here is: what moral obligations does Rand have to say are binding someone who has not made that choice positively? In other words, what should be Rand’s own moral evaluation of one who has not chosen to live? This critical question has not been answered by Rand.

Again, in contrast to Rand’s position, Scot argues that there seems to be a clear sense in which I am subject to “categorical imperative” quite apart from my own “choice to live”<sup>127</sup>. This entails that there are other moral obligations which do not arise as a consequence of my “choice to live”. Here is a scenario that Scot paints: a situation where I have decided to commit suicide, and am now driving my car at ninety miles per hour toward achieving my goal of killing myself. Just moments before I hit, a little girl wanders out in front of my car. The question is: should I swerve to miss her, or should I ignore her and run over her?

This scenario is hypothetical as we can see but the point is that if I am under any moral obligation at all to avoid killing the little girl by hitting her even when I myself am hell-bent on killing myself and about to achieve it, then I have a source of obligation other than my own choice “to live”- one, indeed, altogether independent of this alleged “choice”, and one setting limits within which my own “choice” must be exercised<sup>128</sup>. That is why Scot also asserts:

Since Rand denies that I have any such obligation, she must also deny that the well-being of persons other than myself directly imposes any sort of moral constraint on my behaviour. Despite her assertions to the contrary, then, her ethic provides no foundation for either benevolence or rights- both of which involves respect for the well-being of persons other than oneself for reasons not strictly reducible to the prudent pursuit of one’s own self-interest<sup>129</sup>

I quite agree with Scot on the above assertion. The well-being of other persons could necessarily oblige me to undertake some moral actions without considering myself as such. This makes Rand’s position not correct as such.

Consequently, one could actually agree with Scot when he affirms that Rand has found it difficult to acknowledge or embrace the virtue of benevolence. It is a basic error or ambiguity according to Scot. This is because Rand had said that values make sense only with reference to one’s own life as one’s highest value. For Scot, this assertion of Rand is at the heart of her approach to ethics and provides the keystone of her “derivation” of rational egoism<sup>130</sup>.

<sup>125</sup> Ayn Rand, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, 23

<sup>126</sup> Scot Ryan, *Objectivism and the Corruption of Rationality*, 295

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 302

<sup>128</sup> Scot Ryan, *Objectivism and the Corruption of Rationality*, 302

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 302

<sup>130</sup> Scot Ryan, *Objectivism and the Corruption of Rationality*, 306

He says it is fraught with misunderstanding and would not suffice as a basis for strict rational egoism if it were understood in a more reasonable way<sup>131</sup>.

### Ayn Rand's Denunciation of Benevolence

As it has been said earlier on, Rand has willingly refused to acknowledge the virtue of benevolence. In her ethics Rand tends to collapse all moral concerns into self-regard, apparently on the view that if it is not morally proper for one to be the moral beneficiary of one's actions, one is morally required to "sacrifice" oneself, that is, to die. Her conclusion is that, morally, one must be the intended beneficiary of all one's actions<sup>132</sup>. This is not completely correct because it does not necessarily follow as such. That is why Scot says "it is entirely possible at least for all Rand has said about it, that prudent self-guard and justice and benevolence set the moral limits within which we ought to act (and therefore rule out Randian "sacrifice" without reducing all of our moral aims to self-guard)<sup>133</sup>.

Again, Rand's position portrays the virtue of benevolence as a vice, and this is wrong on the part of Rand. It is because of this that I agree with Scot when he says:

it is perfectly clear that there is something right and good about the virtue of benevolence, so clear that indeed we think there must be something wrong with anyone who cannot see it; the values it seeks- the life, health, and well-being of one's fellow humans- are among the most obvious values in the world to any sane adult and surely deserve to be well represented in the value-hierarchy of any genuinely "value-seeking personality"<sup>134</sup>

Rand like I said earlier on, holds a contrary opinion to what Scot has expressed above and this is where she perhaps, got it wrong.

In line with Scot, Barbara Branden has this to say about Rand: "to Ayn, other people were not fully real; they were moving and breathing abstractions, they were, for good or ill, the embodiments of moral and psychological principles"<sup>135</sup>. And this blindness to the reality of other persons has consequences for Rand's ethics.

In addition, Josiah Royce in his work *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, asserts thus: "the essential "moral insight" by nature involves the principle that we should act, as far as we can, as if we and our neighbours constitute one life, as if there is a single overarching self who shares the conflicting aims of each of us". He says it has a corollary: "act in such a way as to extend this moral insight to others"<sup>136</sup>. Rand does not see it this way. She takes a contrary perspective which is erroneous in my view.

Again, in this regard, I concur with Scot when he says: "we should try to place and keep ourselves, so far as we can, in such a psycho-spiritual condition that we can recognize the aims of other persons, without distortion or misunderstanding"<sup>137</sup>. It is more like what Royce said that we cannot fully recognize the aims of other persons without in some sense making them our own. In my view, Rand has failed in this regard.

In addition, I agree with James Rachels when he says that "morality requires that we balance our own interests against the interests of others"<sup>138</sup>. This is not the case with Ayn Rand. The interests of others are least in her mind. There is no balance whatsoever. According to James, much as our own interests are important and a priority, which is not a problem, however, we have to at the same time, realize that the needs of others are equally important, and when we can help others, we should not hesitate to do so, all the more when it costs us little to do. Again, Rand does not see it this way. Everyone to themselves she would say.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 306

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 300

<sup>133</sup> Ibid

<sup>134</sup> Scot Ryan, *Objectivism and the Corruption of Rationality*, 312-313

<sup>135</sup> Barbara Branden, *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, (New York: Doubleday, 1986) 263

<sup>136</sup> Josiah Royce, *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958) 146

<sup>137</sup> Scot Ryan, *Objectivism and the Corruption of Rationality*, 317

<sup>138</sup> James Rachel, 'Ethical Egoism' in *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, 93

James Rachels paints an example thus: suppose you are thinking of spending ten dollars on a trip to the movies, when you are reminded that ten dollars could buy food for a starving child. Thus you could do a great service for the child at a little cost to yourself. Common-sense morality would say, then, that you should give the money for famine relief rather than spending it on the movies<sup>139</sup>. Rand may not buy this perspective. One could then say that if she strictly sticks to her philosophy, she could be lacking common-sense morality. This is because we do have moral duties to other people. We do have “natural duties to others simply because they are people who could be helped or harmed by our actions<sup>140</sup>. If a certain action would benefit (or harm) other people, then that is a reason why we should (or should not) do that action. The common-sense assumption is that other people’s interests count, for their own sakes, from a moral point of view<sup>141</sup>. But Rand would not agree to this view and as such could be mistaken.

There are some other people who have also denounced Ayn Rand’s kind of ethics. These include Jennifer Burns, Glen Stassen and John Paul Lederach. Here are their remarks concerning Rand.

Jennifer Burns, having studied Ayn Rand at length made remarks that Rand’s ethics perhaps, is reactionary. Rand reacted to the experience she had as a young woman in Russia when all their family property was forcefully taken away by the then communist Russian government<sup>142</sup>. This experience negatively affected her and her life and philosophy. One can then understand the background that Rand is coming from and why she is reactionary in almost all aspects of her life including her ethics.

However, according to Glen Stassen in his article *Common Good Versus the Virtue of Selfishness* doing ethics as reaction is dangerous. It leads to resentment and hate. It can block us from understanding the cares that others have- especially if they see things a little differently. It causes a dangerous either/or, with hate and anger against one pole of the either/or dichotomy, and an idolatrous absolutizing of the extreme opposite pole. It excludes sensitivities to truths and realities in between. Life isn’t just two opposite things; life is complicated. It includes many complicated realities. This is why John Paul Lederach would say that “the moral imagination is built on a quality of interaction with reality that respects complexity and refuses to fall into forced containers of dualism and either- or categories”<sup>143</sup>. I do agree with both Stassen and John Paul on this point.

Again, Glen Stassen asserts that ‘reactionary ethics blocks us against caring about other dimensions of life and needs besides the two extremes of reactionary polarization. It creates an authoritarian ethic that accepts only true believers, and rejects those who have other valid concerns. And it causes the emotion of resentment or hatred to conquer our good sense’<sup>144</sup>. This could perhaps, be true and we have to see Rand from this perspective.

In my view, since Rand has expressed her views in a reactionary way, her views cannot be objective because she might be coming from a biased mind in that she had a not- too- good experience as a young lady with the Russian government. It is a contradiction then to call her philosophy objectivism when she is writing from a biased perspective.

## Conclusion

Finally, I can say that Rand’s affirmation of “selfishness” as a virtue in her objectivist ethics is at best arbitrary. The bad news is that most of us have the inclination of being extremely selfish in our daily dealings. And it has affected every aspect of our societal life. People engage in the plunder of public resources following from their selfish urge, no thanks to Ayn Rand and her views. Also, it is really difficult to draw a line between what Rand conceives as rational selfishness and the conventional meaning of material selfishness *per se*. In action, you cannot distinguish between the two. Selfishness as a term already depicts something wrong or evil. How can it then be termed a virtue by Rand? What a contradiction in terms

<sup>139</sup> James Rachel, ‘Ethical Egoism’ in *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, 193

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 194

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>142</sup> Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 9-10

<sup>143</sup> John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art of Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford, 2003) 36

<sup>144</sup> Glen Stassen, *Common Good Versus the Virtue of Selfishness (art)* in the Baptist Theologies Journal, 2012, p.31

It is based on this background that we are saying that Rand misconstrued the concept of selfishness as well as the concept of altruism. She did not give a holistic view of both concepts. It is my contention then that Rand misconstrued the concepts of both selfishness and altruism, in that she limited herself only to the dictionary meaning of the concepts. And the dictionary meaning of a thing does not wholly capture what it entails in all contexts. It is based on the foregoing that we have refuted Rand's view of seeing selfishness as a virtue and altruism as a vice. Selfishness is not to a great extent a virtue as conceived by Rand.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

From the foregoing, we recommend that the concept of selfishness as portrayed by Rand has to be seriously deemphasized as it will have a negative impact in the society with regard to our relationship with one another. If allowed to flourish, then we will find ourselves in the brutish world of Thomas Hobbes where man is wolf to man in the quest for survival. This is the path we would rather not tread. On the contrary, the practice of altruism should be seriously and vehemently taught from earliest time so that it can register in the consciousness of people such that they can apply them in their daily dealings.

Unlike Rand, one of the things we should do as human beings is to care about the interests of other people because the very reason for which we so much care about our own interests should be the same reason for which we have to care about other people's interests. There is every likelihood that the needs and desires of other people can be compared to our own needs and desires. In other words, we have similar needs and desires as human beings. Our morality then should be to a large extent based on our recognition of the needs of others.

We can say that Rand's ethics is all about not caring about others. In my view, Rand is saying that a human being should be "passionless" *per se*, having no compassion or feeling. This I think is not tenable. If we followed Rand's brand of ethics, an ethics of ideological reaction, then the poor would be left to fend for themselves, without our compassion. This will be seen as being inhuman. And in my view, to be inhuman is to be irrational as against what Rand thinks is irrational. To this end, am moved to recommend that her ethics be rejected because of its bad or negative influence on the society.

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