

Rand on The Objectivity of Values¹

i. Abstract

In this paper, I argue for an epistemological interpretation of Ayn Rand's claim that values are objective. I claim that the objectivity of value applies only in the case of human values, and that values are in this context objective because they are to be discovered by objective conceptual processes and their attainment requires objective conceptual thought applied to deliberation about action. In other words, I endorse:

EO: on Rand's view, values are objective because they are identified and pursued by means of conceptual knowledge, and they inherit the epistemological objectivity that applies to all conceptual knowledge.

I argue against three metaphysical interpretations of the objectivity of value:

MI1: on Rand's view, values are objective *simply* because they are in some (weak) sense mind-independent

MI2: on Rand's view, values are objective in a (stronger) Moorean sense – they might exist in a world that contained no living organisms capable of initiating goal-directed action, and

OR: on Rand's view, values are objective because they are ontologically relational – because they require both an *agent* and an *alternative*.

I show that MI1 is untenable because it allows that certain versions of intrinsicism count as objective theories of value. I also show that, given Rand's views on the conditions for the existence of values, view MI2 is simply a mistake – a mistake that could only result from total inattention to Rand's metaethical positions and technical vocabulary. I also show that, though values *are*, as OR maintains,

¹ This essay grew out of a conversation with Chris Heathwood on Aristotle's regress argument (at *NE* 1094a). I thank Roger Donway, Michael Huemer, and Will Wilkinson for discussions that clarified my thinking on these issues. I especially thank David Kelley and William Thomas for their very helpful comments on the paper and also for their encouragement and support of my work on Objectivism. I also thank Allan Gotthelf for sharing with me his paper, "The Choice to Value." I have also benefited from the study of Tara Smith's recent book, *Viable Values*. In all that follows, I speak only for myself, and *not* for any of the individuals above or any organization.

ontologically relational, this should not be taken as the source of their objectivity, because this interpretation would attribute to Rand a separate concept designated by the term “objective” that she did not explicitly recognize and that is not required in order to make sense of her position.

I. Introduction to the Problem

Rand holds that values are objective. For instance, she writes, “Since *the good is objective*, it has to be defined in terms of abstract principles covering a wide variety of concretes; it is up to every individual to apply these principles to the particular goals and problems of his own life” (ARL 374; emphasis mine). She also writes that “If one knows that the *good is objective* – i.e., determined by the nature of reality, but to be discovered by man’s mind – one knows that an attempt to achieve the good by physical force ... negates morality at its root ...” (CUI 23; emphasis mine).

Rand’s commentators are, on this point, more explicit. Leonard Peikoff writes simply that “Values are objective” (OPAR 248). David Kelley writes that “Rand’s great insight is that the [subjective/intrinsic] dichotomy is false. Values are neither intrinsic nor subjective, but objective” (Kelley 1999 6). Allan Gotthelf concurs: “That is to say, according to Ayn Rand, moral values are *objective*” (Gotthelf 2000 84; emphasis in original). Tara Smith writes, “The recognition that life is the source, goal, and standard of value carries a significant implication that warrants special attention, however: Values are objective” (Smith 2000 97).

Furthermore, Rand describes her theory of values as the “objective theory” on the nature of moral values. In a passage from “What is Capitalism?” that will be crucial for our investigations, she says

There are in essence, three schools of thought on the nature of the good: the intrinsic, the subjective, and the objective. The *intrinsic* theory holds that the good is inherent in certain things or actions as such, regardless of their context and consequences, regardless of any benefit or injury they may cause to the actors and subjects involved. It is a theory that divorces the concept of ‘good’ from beneficiaries, and the concept of ‘value’ from valuer and purpose – claiming that the good is good in, by, and of itself.

The *subjectivist* theory holds that the good bears no relation to the facts of reality, that it is the product of a man's consciousness, created by his feelings, desires, 'intuitions,' or whims, and that it is merely an arbitrary postulate or an emotional commitment.

The intrinsic theory holds that the good resides in some sort of reality, independent of man's consciousness; the subjectivist theory holds that the good resides in man's consciousness, independent of reality.

The *objective* theory holds that the good is neither an attribute of 'things in themselves' nor of man's emotional states, but an evaluation of the facts of reality by man's consciousness according to a rational standard of value. (Rational, in this context, means: derived from the facts of reality and validated by a process of reason.) The objective theory holds that the good is an aspect of reality in relation to man – and that it must be discovered, not invented, by man. Fundamental to an objective theory of values is the question: Of value to whom and for what? (CUI 21-22)

This, of course, raises the question: what does it mean, precisely, to say that values are "objective" or that a theory of values is "objective"? And this question, in turn, raises an interpretative problem.

Rand explicitly recognizes two kinds of objectivity (although what she writes does not strictly rule out the possibility of a third concept, she nowhere acknowledges or hints that there are more than two). In "Who is the Final Authority in Ethics?", she writes

Objectivity is both a metaphysical and an epistemological concept. It pertains to the relationship of consciousness to existence. Metaphysically, it is the recognition of the fact that reality exists independent of any perceiver's consciousness. Epistemologically, it is the recognition of the fact that a perceiver's consciousness must acquire knowledge of reality by certain means (reason) in accordance with certain rules (logic) (VOR 18).

To say that some particular thing is metaphysically objective is to say that it has a determinate existence independent of any particular perceiver's consciousness (I call this "weak mind-independence"). To claim that this concept applies to moral values, and hence that MII is true, would not be a highly original thesis. G. E. Moore, perhaps the most famous and respected ethicist of the 20th Century, maintains such a thesis². Moore derides the view that a thing's value is dependent on the kind of

² Moore claims that values are intrinsic, though he certainly also believes that they are objective: "... from the proposition that a particular kind of value is 'intrinsic' it does follow that it must be 'objective'" (Moore 1922 29).

mental attitude that a person has towards it. He believes that there are real, “objective” values, that they exist independently of our awareness of them or our beliefs about them, and that it is incumbent upon us to identify them (Moore 28-29).

But there are immediate reasons to suspect that the objectivity of values amounts to something different (or at least, to something *more*) than MI1 for Rand. Later, I will look more closely at the details of Rand’s metaethics to see if moral values are objective in this sense. But even before doing that, we can say this: if the objectivity Rand claims for values amounted only to weak mind-independence, then there would be no philosophically interesting contrast between her own objective theory and the intrinsic theory described above. Recall that the intrinsic theory holds (according to Rand) that “the good is inherent in certain things or actions as such, regardless of their context and consequences, regardless of any benefit or injury they may cause to the actors and subjects involved” (CUI 21). Now, if the objectivity of values means only their determinate existence independent of any particular perceiver’s mental attitudes, then another view of Moore’s – his view that certain states-of-affairs have non-instrumental value even when radically isolated from human consciousness – is entirely consistent with an objective theory of value. But this view, which is simply a way of affirming that the good is inherent in certain things as such, regardless of context, consequences, and beneficiaries, is clearly not (for Rand) consistent with an objective theory of value³. Therefore, the objectivity of values is not merely the weak mind-independence described by MI1.

We might clarify what has just been established by considering the kind of radical mind-independence that Moore claims for values (though it should be noted that Moore, himself, does not claim that this is the source of the objectivity of values; cf. Moore 1922 28-31). In *Principia Ethica*, Moore attempts a refutation of Henry Sidgwick’s hedonism, especially Sidgwick’s position that “No one

³ And if we accept this, we can also rule out MI2: for MI2 actually *identifies* the objectivity of values with this sort of radical mind-and-agent-independence. Unfortunately, I cannot illustrate the degree of error involved in the suggestion that MI2 captures the Rand’s objectivity of values, yet. But observe, for now, that it makes self-contradictory nonsense of the passage from “What is Capitalism?”.

would consider it rational to aim at the production of beauty ... apart from any possible contemplation of it by human beings” (quoted in Moore 1903 135). Moore writes:

Let us imagine one world exceedingly beautiful. Imagine it as beautiful as you can; put into it whatever on this earth you most admire – mountains, rivers, the sea; trees, and sunsets, stars and moon. Imagine these all combined in the most exquisite proportions, so that no one thing jars against another, but each contributes to increase the beauty of the whole. And then imagine the ugliest world you can possibly conceive. Imagine it as simply one heap of filth, containing everything that is most disgusting to us ... The only thing we are not entitled to imagine is that any human being ever has or ever, by any possibility, can, live in either, can ever see and enjoy the beauty of the one or hate the foulness of the other. ... Well, even ... supposing them quite apart from any possible contemplation by human beings; still, is it irrational to hold that it is better that the beautiful world should exist, than the one which is ugly? Would it not be well ... to do what we could to produce it rather than the other? Certainly I cannot help thinking that it would ... (Moore 1903, 135)

Moore’s argument appears to run as follows: if hedonism is true, then the non-instrumental value of the beautiful world is equal to the non-instrumental value of the disgusting world. But this is not so, and hedonism is therefore false. To say that the non-instrumental value of the beautiful world is in fact greater than the non-instrumental value of the disgusting world requires Moore to maintain that the good at least *can* be (in Rand’s words) “inherent in certain things or actions as such, regardless of their context and consequences, regardless of any benefit or injury they may cause to the actors and subjects involved.” Moore must maintain this because he attributes a difference in value to two worlds that (a) contain no human subjects, and (b) are not even objects of human consciousness. This view of value is apparently consistent with the weak mind-independence of value projected by MI1. But clearly, this is a view of value that Rand believes inconsistent with the objectivity of value, and so (to repeat) the objectivity of value cannot merely amount to the claim that values are weakly independent of human-consciousness. MI1 is therefore false.

Retreating to Rand’s statement of the two kinds of objectivity, it might be suggested that values are instead epistemically objective – that they are objective *because* they can only be identified by a human consciousness that uses certain means and accords to certain rules.

The apparent problem with this view is that Rand's language in the passage already cited from "What is Capitalism?" has a strong metaphysical cast. Consider the following excerpt:

The intrinsic theory holds that the good resides in some sort of reality, independent of man's consciousness; the subjectivist theory holds that the good resides in man's consciousness, independent of reality. ... The objective theory holds that the good is an aspect of reality in relation to man (CUI 22).

Here, it appears that Rand is comparing these three theories in terms of their ontology of value. It appears that she is contrasting the theories in terms of *where* and *what kind of thing* they project value to be. The intrinsicist holds that values are just as strictly mind-independent as planets, trees, and electrons – they exist “out there,” “in the world,” “in nature.” The subjectivist holds that value is “in the mind,” that it is created or constituted by an act of (individual or social) consciousness. The objectivist holds that values are, ontologically speaking, *relational entities*: they require for their existence both a world that has certain mind-independent features *and* a certain kind of subject⁴. This ontological contrast does not seem to be assimilable to the epistemological interpretation of objectivity. In short, if values are objective (at least in part) because they are ontologically relational, then the objectivity of values cannot be purely epistemic.

This train of thought apparently leads to the rejection of the epistemological analysis of objectivity and eventually to the postulation of a third kind of objectivity. This third kind of objectivity is a metaphysical concept, though a metaphysical concept different from the root notion of mind-independence and the stronger claim of mind-and-agent-independence. It is the kind of objectivity had by a thing that is ontologically dependent on a relation. So perhaps, in this case, values are objective because

⁴ I recognize that this last formulation is unbearably loose. But this looseness is unavoidable, since the initial plausibility of this interpretation rests on a misunderstanding of the ontological relationship that grounds value (and *this* misunderstanding depends, I think, on an erroneous view of the “choice to live”). This interpretation projects a contrast between things that are (1) purely mental, (2) purely in the world, and (3) ontologically dependent upon both mind and world. But for Rand, values are not ontologically dependent upon both mind and world, but rather ontologically dependent upon both a certain kind of agent (one that is capable of initiating goal-directed action in pursuit of life) and a certain kind of world (a world that presents the agent with a fundamental alternative between life and death and therefore presents the agent with conditions or requirements for

they are ontologically dependent on a relation between an organism capable of initiating goal-directed action *and* a fundamental alternative.

The problem with this solution is that this species of objectivity enjoys scant direct support from the text aside from the passage cited above. And, adding this sense of “objective” to Rand’s list of technical terms makes this passage seem obfuscatory; using one word to refer to three related technical notions simply cannot be a good way to communicate ideas. It also makes Rand appear insufficiently self-conscious: for if she realized that she had done this, why did she not simply call her theory the “relational” theory of value? And, it invites charges of deception. I can imagine someone saying, *“A-ha! She trades on the rhetorical impact of Moore’s tough-minded, conservative conception of objectivity, but what she really means is neither that nor the less-common epistemological concept, but some third thing that looks like what Kierkegaard calls a ‘negative unity.’ Enough. I will go read some more forthright and plainspoken philosopher.”*

In what follows, I hope to defend Rand from such charges by showing that the objectivity Rand predicates of values is – despite appearances – the epistemological objectivity that she explicitly recognizes and describes in the passage from “Who is the Final Authority in Ethics?”. Furthermore, I hope it will emerge that her theory allows us to claim all the “solidity” and “fixity” for values and value-facts that we could rationally want. But my argument, here, will be mostly textual and historical: I want to understand what Rand’s position was and why she described it in the terms that she did. Of course, I also think that the resultant composite of moral value is philosophically plausible – though any argument for this last claim will be exclusively indirect.

To explain why Rand describes her theory as the objective theory of the good, and to explain the tenets that characterize an objective theory of the good, we must get a clearer understanding of the two senses of “objectivity” already introduced, and also a clearer view of the details of Rand’s positive ethical theory. So, the remainder of this paper has three main parts. First, in part II, I examine Rand’s several

achievement and maintenance of life). I hope that this and related issues will be clarified in the remainder of the

discussions and applications of the term, “objectivity.” Then, in part III, I offer an outline of Rand’s ethical theory, where I hope to provide some basic understanding what things Rand counts as values and why. Finally, in part IV, I return to the main questions: how, according to Rand, are values objective, and why is her theory an objective theory of the good?

II. “Objectivity”

The word “objective” and its cognates are ubiquitous in Rand’s writings: Rand calls her philosophy “Objectivism” (FNI viii). She lambastes those who evade or erode the concept of “an objective reality” (AS 957, 958, 961, 978). She writes that “objectivity” requires an “active mind – a mind able and eagerly willing to examine ideas, but to examine them critically,” and that it produces “objective definitions,” “objectively valid” concepts, and “objective knowledge” (ITOE 46, 78; PWNI 21).

How is the objectivity of values, and the objectivity of her theory of the nature of moral values, related to the objectivity that Rand ascribes to reality, and to methods of mental functioning and their products? Are these both applications of one concept, or are they related concepts of objectivity? We must discuss each of these types of objectivity in turn.

A. Objective as referring to the status of things whose nature and existence is mind-independent

As noted earlier, Rand expresses her agreement with (what she takes to be) a basic Aristotelian precept: that reality is what it is, independent of us. She writes:

[Aristotle] defined the *basic* principles of a rational view of existence and of man’s consciousness: that there is only *one* reality, the one which man perceives – that it exists as an *objective* absolute (which means: independently of consciousness, the wishes or feelings of any perceiver) ... (FNI 22)

Or, to take some further examples: in *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, Rand writes: “It is time to grant to man's consciousness the same cognitive respect one grants to his body - i.e., the same objectivity” (ITOE, 82). In her *Los Angeles Times* column entitled, “Introducing Objectivism,” she writes that in metaphysics, she advocates “Objective Reality.” She explains that, “My philosophy, Objectivism, holds that: Reality exists as an objective absolute - facts are facts, independent of man's feelings, wishes, hopes, or fears ...” (VOR, 4). Finally, in the essay, “Philosophical Detection,” Rand writes, “... Kant substituted the collective for the objective (in the form of ‘categories’ collectively creating a ‘phenomenal’ world)” (PWNI 20).

In these four passages, I think that Rand is using “objective” in its usual sense, simply to designate determinate, mind-independent reality (note the parenthetical definition in the first passage). She uses it to designate the fact that a thing (or group of things) exists and has the properties that it does independent of minds, their attributes, and their actions. This sense of “objectivity” is of course very familiar. Peter Angeles, in the *Harper Collins Dictionary of Philosophy* explains it like this:

objective existence (reality) existence of an entity or an object in the external world ... that exists independently of our perception, conception, or judgment of it, as opposed to being merely a subjective existence in our mind or to being known in terms of our biases, feelings, and personal judgments. (Angeles, 209)

So in the quote from *ITOE*, Rand means to say that human consciousness has a determinate nature that is independent – both for its existence and its identity – of our conceptions, emotions, and judgments. The quote from “Philosophical Detection” ascribes to Immanuel Kant a species of idealism⁵, which amounts to a denial of the existence of mind-independent reality. The quote from “Understanding Objectivism” affirms that all of reality - everything in the physical world - exists independent of consciousness and has a determinate nature. This concept might be described as follows:

⁵ It is controversial whether Kant actually held such a view. In the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant adds to the chapter “The postulates of empirical thinking in general” a portion called “The refutation of Idealism,” where he appears to attempt refutation of the view Rand has in mind (Kant 1787 B265-287). For an introductory discussion of this point, see A. C. Ewing's *A Short Commentary on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (Ewing 1938 176-198). It is worth noting that many German Idealists, including Arthur Schopenhauer, seem to have ignored this addition to the second edition (Scruton 1995 177).

O(m): an existent is objective if and only if it exists and has the properties that it does independent of (any particular) epistemic subjects, their attributes, and their actions.

Rand takes the doctrine that reality exists independent of consciousness and has a determinate nature to be her basic metaphysical stance, the “root” of her entire system of philosophy (PWNI 24). At this level of full generality, Rand has a special, technical name for this metaphysical objectivity: “the primacy of existence.” The primacy of existence is a principle which asserts that reality, as a whole, is independent of mind. Rand explains:

The primacy of existence (of reality) is the axiom that existence exists, i.e., that the universe exists independent of consciousness (of *any* consciousness), that things are what they are, that they possess a specific nature, an identity. The epistemological corollary is the axiom that consciousness is the faculty of perceiving that which exists - and that man gains knowledge by looking outward. (PWNI 24)

For Rand, this fact is an axiom because it is both fundamental and directly experienced. The primacy of existence is fundamental in that all proof presupposes it: any argument for or against the primacy of existence would have to assume it⁶. For this reason, it can neither be proven nor refuted. It can however, be seen to be true in a single outward glance. It is directly evident to the subject who attends to the way in which the world presents itself to conscious awareness.

B. Objective as referring to the normative status of conceptual functioning and/or its products

1. The Core Concept

According to three of Rand’s foremost interpreters - Peikoff, Kelley, and Gotthelf - it is not the foregoing, metaphysical sense of “objective” that is the origin of Rand's name for her philosophy⁷. The

⁶ Rand describes her axioms - that *existence exists*, that *one is conscious*, and that *a thing is itself* - in AS III.vii, “This is John Galt Speaking.” She discusses the empirical origins of the concepts that feature in the propositions that express the axioms in *ITOE*, Chap. 6. More systematic discussion of this issue can be found in OPAR Chap. 1-2; and Kelley 1986 Chap. 1. Cf., also, Sciabarra 1995 Chap. 5-6; Machan 1999 Chap. 2.

⁷Peikoff concludes the chapter on epistemological objectivity in OPAR with the phrase, “The reason why Ayn Rand called her philosophy 'objectivism' should now be clear” (OPAR 151). I infer that, though the primacy of

concept of OBJECTIVE for which Objectivism is named is at root an epistemological one. As we will see, this epistemological concept is the one that can be applied to a one's method of thinking or to the concepts and judgments that one comes to. This is the concept that is operative in such locutions as, "The judge was objective, throughout the trial," and "The bystander gave an objective account of the traffic accident." It is also used in this quote from Rand:

I recommend to your attention an excellent book entitled *The Antitrust Laws of the U.S.A.* by A.D. Neale. It is a scholarly, dispassionate, objective study; the author ... does not confuse facts with interpretations ... (CUI 49).

In the passage from "Who is the Final Authority in Ethics?" already cited, Rand explicitly contrasts this epistemological concept with the metaphysical one just discussed. She writes:

Objectivity is both a metaphysical and an epistemological concept. It pertains to the relationship of consciousness to existence. Metaphysically, it is the recognition of the fact that reality exists independent of any perceiver's consciousness. *Epistemologically, it is the recognition of the fact that a perceiver's (man's) consciousness must acquire knowledge of reality by certain means (reason) in accordance with certain rules (logic).* This means that although reality is immutable, and, in any given context, only one answer is true, the truth is not automatically available to a human consciousness and can be obtained only by a certain mental process ... (VOR 18; emphasis mine).

To be objective in the epistemological sense means to recognize and treat appropriately the fact that human knowledge is had by a particular agent who employs a particular means and method. In one's own thinking, to be objective means to adhere to the correct means and method of conceptual functioning. Concepts and propositions arrived at by the correct application of this means and method can be called "objective," as can theories about conceptual functioning that recognize this fact (more on this, below).

existence and reality-orientation is integral to objectivism, it is the theory of concepts that is Objectivism's namesake. David Kelley writes that Rand's concept of objectivity allowed her to reject "the basic assumption that objectivity requires diaphanous correspondence between mind and reality" (Kelley 1998 84). This allowed Rand, Kelley says, to illustrate a way in which perceptions, concepts, and facts can be both products of the mind and true to reality. In his short study, *On Ayn Rand*, Allan Gotthelf writes that Rand held that epistemological objectivity is "the central concept" (Gotthelf 2000 66).

The *method* of knowledge acquisition is parenthetically identified as logic. Rand defines logic as “the art of non-contradictory identification” (FNI 125). This art must be consciously practiced by an agent, and it consists of the complex skill of integrating candidate concepts and propositions with the total sum of one's antecedent knowledge. (On Rand's account, if one is able to integrate a concept or piece of propositional knowledge in this manner without reaching a contradiction one achieves knowledge; it should be noted that no proposition can be integrated in this way in absence of *positive evidence* in its favor, though this latter notion obviously requires some elucidation).

Rand identifies the *means* of acquiring knowledge as “reason.” Elsewhere, she writes that reason is “the faculty that identifies and integrates the material provided by man's senses” (VOS 20). Rand offers a more detailed account in her essay, “Faith and Force,” where she writes that reason is the faculty that

integrates man's perceptions by means of forming abstractions or conceptions, thus raising man's knowledge from the *perceptual* level ... to the *conceptual* level ... The method which reason employs in this process is logic - and logic is the art of non-contradictory identification. (PWNI 62)

The most important aspects of this passage, I think, are that (a) reason involves the conceptual integration of perceptual data, and (b) this process requires the use of logic in the manner previously discussed. Attending to this first aspect (a), we can say that the conceptual integration of perceptual data, i.e., the process of concept-formation, and all its particular features, is a component of the practice or use of reason. As such, conceptual integration is also essential to epistemological objectivity. Attending to the second aspect (b), we can say that the means of being objective (reason) entails the method (logic), and so that there is a certain redundancy in the earlier definition from Rand (I suspect that this redundancy is for rhetorical emphasis).

But what are the further features of the process of concept-formation, which we now know is integral to reason, and so also to objectivity? Concept-formation takes as its input *percepts*, which (Rand holds) are groups of sensations which are automatically integrated and “retained” (ITOE 5). We are directly aware via these percepts whenever we look out upon the world. But it is the output of the process

- *concepts* - that are the building blocks of propositional knowledge (e.g., green, frog, consumption, velocity). Leonard Peikoff, summarizes the process by which percepts are integrated into concepts in his article, “The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy,” which was approved by Rand and published in her *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*:

To form a concept, one mentally isolates a group of concretes (of distinct perceptual units), on the basis of observed similarities which distinguish them from all other known concretes (similarity is ‘the relationship between two or more existents which possess the same characteristic(s), but in different measure or degree’); then, by a process of omitting the particular measurements of these concretes, one integrates them into a single new mental unit: the concept, which subsumes all concretes of this kind (a potentially unlimited number). (ITOE 97-8).

Let us briefly clarify this process, explicating some of the technical terms that Peikoff uses. In mentally isolating a group of concretes on the basis of observed similarities, a human subject initiates a particular, self-directed act of consciousness. The subject first *regards* some individual thing as a member of a group of other things. “Things,” here, might indicate either “entities, attributes, actions, qualities, [or] relationships ...” (ITOE 10).

This *regarding* is a kind of selective focus. For example, when I look out into my yard, and I look at an individual tree, I might regard it as a member of the group of concretes that would later be the designees of the concept *plant*. This would happen if I selected or focused on the tree as member of the group of things that also includes, e.g., the moss growing in the stone garden and the bushes planted by the chimney. I thereby consider the tree not as a sole, unique thing, but as a member of a group of things that are (on some dimension) similar⁸ to it. It is one of a many.

I might very well regard the tree as member of another group of things, instead (the regardings that are possible, natural, and rational to a subject will depend upon the other features of the immediate environment and the subject's goals). If I focus upon the tree’s woody main stem - the trunk that supports

⁸ Similarity and sameness-of-attribute among existents, I conjecture, must here be taken as brute facts (though she seems to deny this at ITOE 53). I am aware that this complicates classification of Rand’s view on the schema used by Analytic philosophers who discuss the metaphysics of universals (cf. Mellor and Oliver 1997). In my view, more scholarly work needs to be done on this topic.

a bundle of branching, leafy stems - and the other things in the yard that lack or share *this* characteristic, I might regard the entity as a member of the group of concretes that would be maturely designated by the concept, TREE.

In both of these cases, the individual tree is what Rand calls a distinct perceptual *unit*, i.e., “an existent regarded as a separate member of a group of two or more similar members” (ITOE 6).

The group of two or more similar members to which the tree belongs when it is so regarded (either as plant, or as tree) is the group of concretes, whose members exhibit observed similarities, which Peikoff refers to above. The subject reflects on the units of this group of things, searching for the distinctive characteristic of all and only the things in the group. When the subject identifies this characteristic, the subject may then omit (as Peikoff writes) “the particular measurements⁹ of these concretes [and] integrate them into a single new mental unit ...” (ITOE 98).

Let us illustrate this process.

If the subject regards an individual tree as a member of the group of trees (as opposed to the member of some larger or smaller group), the subject views all the trees with attention to this relationship that holds between them. He or she may observe that one dimension along which these trees vary from other perceptual concretes (e.g., stones, shrubs, chipmunks) is their physical shape. Shape, in this case, is a *conceptual common denominator*, or a commensurable characteristic that allows for differentiation. Rand defines a conceptual common denominator as, “the characteristic(s) reducible to a unit of measurement, by means of which man differentiates two or more existents from other existents possessing it” (ITOE 13)¹⁰. Note that “unit” here is used in the ordinary, mathematical sense, not in the technical sense described earlier (cf. ITOE 184-189).

⁹ Measurement, Rand writes, “is the identification of a relationship – a quantitative relationship established by means of a standard that serves as a unit” (ITOE 7).

¹⁰ In the case of a tree, there are many commensurable characteristics that might serve as a basis for differentiation. One can therefore say that trees have multiple conceptual common denominators, or else that their conceptual common denominator is a complex one. The one that is immediately perceivable is, of course, *shape*. But there are also characteristics like *manner of nutrition and growth* that can be used to differentiate trees from other objects, given a more complex cognitive context. It should be noted, then, that what has been said refers

This conceptual common denominator not only specifies how the group-members are differentiated from other objects; it is also the aspect that the group-members have in common. Shape is both what differentiates trees from non-trees *and* the aspect that all trees have in common.

When one forms a concept like tree, one specifies a certain range of geometrical measurements of shape, and then, within that category, the particular measurements of individual tree-shapes are omitted (cf. ITOE 14; she is discussing the example of ‘table’). Thus, the simple concept of tree probably includes that a tree have a longish stem that supports a bunch of leafy branches. Or rather, (Rand appears to think) it would include a formal description of this shape, with a range of permissible variations specified. However, the simple concept of tree would omit the specific measurements of the length and radius of this or that stem, and say that these “omitted measurements must exist in *some* quantity, but may exist in *any* quantity” (ITOE 18). (The measurements that pertain to other attributes of trees, including the length of the branches, the shape of the leaves, the texture of the trunk, are also omitted).

Now, Peikoff refers above to the act of integration that completes the process of concept-formation. I conjecture that there is a continuum of precision in respect to this act of integration. A kind of “bare-bones” integration can probably be performed in the absence of a developed language: in this case, the subject would simply make a mental note of the retained common characteristics, and retain some kind of mental image as its designator. A more mature sort of integration is performed when the subject assigns a visual-auditory symbol (a word) to the product. This is the level of integration that people in modern societies usually reach in dealing with concepts. And the most precise, fully adult stage of integration is the assignment of a formal definition to this word, which explicitly unites the units of the group. People usually achieve this level of integration in regard to concepts that pertain to fields in which precision is imperative (e.g., medicine and law) and technical terms which pertain to their area of work. In all three cases, integration is a uniting, “a blending of the units into a *single*, new *mental* entity

only to the earliest concept of TREE that a subject forms, and that as the subject’s context changes, some different set of differentiating characteristics - probably biological ones -will prompt the refinement of this concept.

which is used thereafter as a single unit of thought (but which can be broken into its component units whenever required)” (ITOE 10).

Rand's definition of the output of this process - a concept - can be read as a highly condensed summary of the process, itself. She writes that a concept is “a mental integration of two or more units which are isolated according to a specific characteristic(s) and united by a specific definition” (ITOE 10). Let us remark on two especially important characteristics of the process that produces concepts.

First, notice that a number of verbs are used in the descriptions of concept-formation and concepts: *observing*, *regarding*, *isolating*, *omitting*, *integrating*, and *uniting*. These, of course, take a particular agent as their subject (concepts, *qua* abstractions, exist in the minds of individual people). And, the actions described by these verbs are all actions that must be *volitionally initiated* by the subject. Although these actions occur in such a manner and at such a speed that they are frequently difficult to introspect, they are not automatic actions of consciousness but chosen ones. As Leonard Peikoff writes in his work *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*,

In contrast to perception, conceptualization is not an automatic reaction to stimuli ... Concept-formation and use is precisely the realm that is not automatic or infallible, but volitional. In order to conceptualize, a man ... must struggle to relate, connect, *process* an ever-growing range of data - and he must learn to do it correctly. (OPAR 111)

Many of Rand's most well-known formulations emphasize the volitional character of human thought. In *Atlas Shrugged*, she writes:

The key to what you so recklessly call 'human nature,' the open secret you live with, yet dread to name, is the facts that *man is a being of volitional consciousness*. Reason does not work automatically; thinking is not a mechanical process; the connections of logic are not made by instinct. (AS 1012)

In the title essay of *For the New Intellectual*, Rand is even more explicit. She writes that conceptual integration itself is volitional¹¹: “to integrate perceptions into conceptions by a process of abstraction, is a feat that man alone has the power to perform - and he has to perform it by choice” (FNI 14). Thus, the fact that concepts must be volitionally integrated by individual human minds is essential to the process of concept-formation.

There is a second characteristic of concept-formation that deserves special attention. This characteristic is implicit in Rand’s remark that only a “certain mental process” will succeed at grasping the truth, her emphasis on logic as the method of being objective, and also in the passages quoted from Peikoff. It is that correct concept-formation (and propositional knowledge) requires that the subject volitionally aim at truth and self-regulate in accordance with facts. In order to consistently and reliably form concepts (and propositions) that correspond to reality, one must set congruence with reality as one’s goal. One must aim to attend to reality as it really is even in the initial acts of observing and regarding in order that the resultant concepts be true to reality.

This aiming, or directing, of thought toward the truth requires the adherence to a complex set of cognitive principles that are beyond the scope of this discussion. These principles would include rules for focusing one’s attention (*on what, how, and when*); the strictures of Aristotelian, sentential, and predicate logic; and sound procedures for inductive inference (such as Mill’s Methods and basic probability theory). In order that a cognitive principle pass the test for being a means of aiming toward the truth, it must be congruent with the hierarchical and contextual character of human knowledge¹².

These two features of the process of concept-formation – that it must be volitionally initiated and maintained by a subject; and that it must take as its *telos* truth, or congruence with reality – give rise to the need to normatively characterize conceptual functioning. Since an act of choice is necessary on the

¹¹ These and other passages exhibit Rand’s assumptions about the nature of animal cognition and the contribution that non-volitional processes make to human understanding. Since it is enough for our purposes that humans *do* integrate perceptions into conceptions by a process of abstraction, and that this is the mode of understanding that generates propositional knowledge, we need not discuss Rand’s assumptions in detail.

part of the subject both to *initiate* and *direct* concept-formation, concept-formation can fail to occur or occur incorrectly. It is neither automatic nor failsafe and is susceptible to error. And since concept-formation is an integral aspect of reason, and reason is the method of conceptual functioning, conceptual functioning itself inherits this susceptibility to error. It is for this reason that we need a concept to normatively characterize conceptual functioning and its products.

Rand uses the term “objective” to refer to this process (and also, its output – see below) when it is correctly performed. Neither all ways of thinking, nor all products of thought are “on par.” On Rand's view, not only propositions, but cognitive processes and concepts can correspond or fail to correspond with reality. When they correspond with reality, they are objective, because the result of a reality-based process¹³. Just as one cannot assert falsehoods, or use falsehoods as premises in argument, one cannot rationally deploy concepts that were formed, e.g., in willful indifference to relevant facts. (We will soon see these principles in action in our analysis of the concept, VALUE).

We are now in a position to understand the key elements in Peikoff's slightly different (i.e., different¹⁴ from Rand) definition of epistemological objectivity. He writes:

Here, in my own words, is her [Rand's] definition [of objectivity]. To be “objective” in one's conceptual activities is volitionally to adhere to reality by following certain rules of method, a method based on facts *and* appropriate to man's form of cognition. (OPAR, 117; emphasis in original)

¹² For a further description of knowledge, hierarchy, and context, see OPAR 121-141 and Kelley's 1998 monograph, “Evidence and Justification.” Cf. Sciabarra 1995, Chap. 5.

¹³ The notion of a “reality-based process” might be seen as the link - etymologically - between the ordinary concept of metaphysical objectivity and Rand's specialized epistemological notion.

¹⁴ I do not mean to suggest that Peikoff here departs from Rand's analysis. His account seems congruent with the account given by Rand in “Who is the Final Authority in Ethics?” and also with Rand's discussion of justice in *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*. There, Rand explains that justice is objectivity as applied to the judgment of a person's character or actions. Justice entails “basing [one's judgment] exclusively on the factual evidence and by considering all the relevant evidence available” (ITOE 51). The ways in which this judgment can go wrong include: “the lack of sufficient evidence, ... evasion of the evidence, ... [the] inclusion of considerations other than the facts of the case” (ITOE 51). In her positive characterization, Rand mentions the need that a just judgment be fact-focused. In her negative characterization, she mentions that evasion - “the willful suspension of one's consciousness, the refusal to think” - jeopardizes the practice of justice. This, it seems, is another way of characterizing the volitional nature of thought.

All of the aspects we have discussed so far are implicit or explicit in this condensed formulation: *the fact that concepts are formed and deployed by individuals, the volitional nature of thought, and the necessity of a regulating commitment to facts embodied in the adherence to a certain method.* In fact, the aspects of cognitive objectivity threaten to bleed together: there is a certain sense in which it makes no sense to talk either of the initiation of a process apart from its goal, or of a commitment to a goal apart from the means that existentially constitute such a commitment.

2. Further Applications

In the course of discussing the objectivity of values on Rand's ethical theory, Tara Smith writes,

Strictly, it is person who are or are not objective in their judgments concerning value and moral prescriptions, not the values or prescriptions themselves. Objectivity pertains to a person's process of thinking, the manner by which one reaches conclusions. (Smith 2000 120 fn. 30)

I wish to set aside (at present) the components of this statement that refer specifically to values and moral prescriptions. But I think that Smith's main point is correct, and, at this juncture, important to keep in mind. According to our analysis, epistemic objectivity is a property of knowing subjects:

O(e): subjects are objective when they initiate and maintain cognition that is appropriate to the conditions of human awareness and regulated by an aim for the truth.

However, our main goal, here, is to understand why Rand claims that the good is objective and why her theory of values counts as an objective theory of value. Therefore, we must discuss two notions of "objective" that are parasitic on the basic analysis of epistemic objectivity, i.e., objectivity as it is related to the normative assessment of thought).

First, there is a sense in which the *output of cognitive processes* can be called "objective." When a component of conceptual thought – a concept, a definition, or a judgment – has been reached by correct cognitive processes, we can call *it* objective. (Note that this does not imply, strictly speaking, the *truth* of

the judgment or the validity of the concept. Rand is a kind of contextualist, and so she believes that justification and truth can – in unusual circumstances – diverge).

Second, there is a sense in which theories of conceptual functioning (as well as the component doctrines of such theories) can be called “objective.” We have already learned that, on Rand's view, thought must be volitionally initiated and maintained by a subject: knowledge comes from a mind that is *epistemologically active*¹⁵. We have also learned that thought must take as its *telos* congruence with reality: knowledge comes from a mind that *conforms to mind-independent reality*. In brief, when a theory holds or recognizes that the mind is both epistemologically active and must conform to a mind-independent reality, it is called “objective” (or, “Objectivist”). Similarly, components of a theory – including a theory's view of concepts, definitions, and propositions – can be called objective if the theory recognizes that the mind is both epistemologically active and must conform to a mind-independent reality and applies this insight to its view of these components.

The need to characterize a theory or its components as “objective” or “Objectivist” arises in the context of the history of philosophy, when one is examining and identifying the basic errors in alternative theories (ITOE 53-54). Rand believes that it is a rejection of one of the two elements above that characterizes each of the main trends at the place where metaphysics (an account of universals) and epistemology (the nature of concepts) intersect. These two main trends are realism (as exemplified by Plato, Aristotle, and some of the Schoolmen) and nominalism (her language suggests that she takes Locke, Hume, and Wittgenstein to be examples of this school; see below).

On her view, the realists

regard the referents of concepts as *intrinsic*, i.e., as 'universals' inherent in things ... as special existents unrelated to man's consciousness – to be perceived by man directly, like any other concrete existents, but perceived by some non-sensory or extra-sensory means. ... [They attempt], in effect, to preserve the primacy of existence (of reality) by dispensing with

¹⁵ I borrow this term from David Kelley's *The Evidence of the Senses*. He writes: “Consciousness is not metaphysically active. It no more creates its own contents than does the stomach. But it *is* active epistemologically in processing these contents. *What* we are aware of is determined by reality - there is nothing else to be aware of - but *how* we are aware of it is determined by our means of awareness” (Kelley 1986 41).

consciousness – i.e., by converting concepts into concrete existents and reducing consciousness to the perceptual level, i.e., to the automatic function of grasping percepts (by supernatural means, since no such percepts exist). (ITOE 53; emphasis in original)

The nominalists, on the other hand,

regard concepts as *subjective*, i.e., as products of man's consciousness, unrelated to the facts of reality, as mere 'names' or notions arbitrarily assigned to arbitrary groupings of concretes on the ground of vague, inexplicable resemblances. ... [They attempt] to establish the primacy of consciousness by dispensing with existence (with reality) – i.e., by denying the status of existence even to concretes and converting concepts into conglomerates of fantasy, constructed out of the debris of other, lesser fantasies, such as words without referents or incantations of sounds corresponding to nothing in an unknowable reality. (ITOE 53; emphasis in original)

Neither of these schools

regards concepts as *objective*, i.e., as neither revealed nor invented, but as produced by man's consciousness in accordance with the facts of reality, as mental integrations of factual data computed by man - as the products of a cognitive method of classification whose processes must be performed by man, but whose content is dictated by reality. (ITOE 54; emphasis in original)

Rand thus holds that historical schools can be broadly put in these three categories: the intrinsicists, the subjectivists, and the Objectivists (perhaps she only includes herself in this last category). One can see that Peikoff's earlier definition of "objectivity" highlights the features that differentiate Rand's view from two (competing) historical tendencies. He characterized "objectivity" as volitional adherence to reality. On the Randian diagnosis, the intrinsicists have thrown out volition and process, and the subjectivists have thrown out adherence to reality.

Now, it might be suggested that these passages actually contain evidence that Rand has a metaphysical concept of objectivity that is different from either of the two that we have hitherto discussed. This is as good a place as any to deal with this objection.

The strongest evidence, I think, that can be marshaled in favor of this objection is that Rand uses the word "intrinsic," and she follows it with, "i.e., as universals inherent in things ..."; she uses the word "subjective," and she follows it with "i.e., as products of man's consciousness ..."; she uses the word

“objective,” and she follows it with “i.e., as neither revealed nor invented, but as produced by man’s consciousness in accordance with the facts of reality” (ITOE 53). One might read the emphasis in these formulations as metaphysical. It must also be noted that she explicitly connects intrinsicism and subjectivism to metaphysical doctrines: the primacy of existence, and the primacy of consciousness, respectively.

I think that this objection – to the extent that it is at all plausible – capitalizes on Rand’s predilection for “wild philosophy,” to modify an expression from psychoanalysis. If we disregard Rand’s asides and embellishments (esp., her attempt to link concept-formation archetypes with metaphysical archetypes) and stick to the main line of argument, this objection can be shown to be misguided¹⁶. This passage occurs at the end of a chapter on definitions in a treatise on epistemology. In the immediately preceding section, Rand seeks to establish that essences are epistemological – that they are a “device of man’s method of cognition – a means of classifying, condensing, and integrating an ever-growing body of knowledge” (ITOE 52). It is clear from the context that Rand then decides to contrast her Objectivist theory with two incorrect alternative accounts, and that this contrast proceeds in terms of epistemology. The realists allege that we can perceive the special existents that are concepts by a passive outward gaze – we need merely respond to what is given and revealed, we need not initiate or maintain any special cognitive state. The nominalists allege that we create the existents that correspond to concepts by the initiation of creative thought that is, and should be, essentially unconstrained – “knowledge” is created by process. So, wild philosophy aside, I think that this is the point that is being established.

¹⁶ I would like to note that I am somewhat embarrassed to comment on such “historical” passages. Archetypes like the ones Rand employs are only valid forms of cognition if they facilitate thinking in essentials by condensing data without significant distortion or loss. Although there are obviously some points of contact between, say, Rand’s intrinsicist archetype and Plato or G. E. Moore, and between her subjectivist archetype and William James and Gilles Deleuze, I think it is very difficult to find any historical figure that fits one of these archetypes to a degree that is philosophically illuminating. I should add that, though Rand’s vituperation makes her works sometimes embarrassing (and here there is a really obvious parallel with Nietzsche), they are also (like Nietzsche’s) rich in interesting and sophisticated philosophical content. I wish that more people would study them with the care that they demand and the seriousness that they ultimately deserve.

III. The Conditions of Value, and A Brief Outline of Rand's Normative Ethics of Behavior

Rand advocated a life-based axiology¹⁷, and she characterized her theory in the normative ethics of behavior¹⁸ as the “morality of rational self-interest” (VOS xi). For her, the requirements of human life define the human good, and right actions are actions in accordance with principles that tend to sustain and protect human life (VOS 25).

Although Rand sometimes characterized her theory as a variant of egoism, it has little in common with the more familiar forms of egoism (TO Sept. 1971, PWNI 22; VOS 158-161). Her theory differs from traditional formulations of egoism both in its content – the actions it recommends – and in the methodology that governs her arguments for its truth.

In its content, Rand's theory has more in common with Plato and Aristotle, who held that one must be just in order to be happy, than it does with Friedrich Nietzsche, who said that the good was “all that heightens the feeling of power” (Nietzsche 1895 §2). Rand contends that actions guided by honesty, justice, and a prizing of creative achievement are *right*, irrespective of whether they satisfy some particular individual's desires. She believes that lying, sadism, and theft are *wrong*, irrespective of the desire-satisfaction, sensory pleasure, or attitudinal pleasure that they might temporarily generate for some agent. The former, she held, support and protect an individual's own life; the latter are inconsistent with the conditions of one's survival.

But the greater distance between Rand's theory and more familiar forms of egoism lies in the argument she employs to establish her theory's truth. Rand does not base her theory on psychological egoism, and she does base it on some grand vision about what type of person one “ought to breed” (VOS 66-70; cf. Nietzsche 1895 §3). Nor does Rand submit her theory as an analysis of the right that is supposed to stand in perfect coherence with our intuitive judgments; indeed, she grants no evidentiary or justificational status to intuitions (CUI 23). Instead, she presents her theory as a revisionary ethical theory whose truth is established by direct evidence and positive argumentation.

¹⁷ Do not fear: I use this word simply to designate foundational value-theory.

Rand's argument begins with a methodological point. In her book, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, Rand argues that the proper method for conceptual analysis is to ask this question: "What fact or facts of reality gave rise to this concept? What distinguishes it from all other concepts?" (ITOE 51). In answering this question, she says, one must carefully retrace the specific (logical, not chronological) steps by which the concept was formed, and one must be able to demonstrate the concept's connection to perceptual reality (ITOE 51).

It is this procedure of conceptual analysis, applied to the concepts ETHICS and VALUE¹⁹, that yields the starting point for Rand's moral philosophy. Though many philosophers simply take such concepts for granted, even in absence of a coherent explication (some claim that none is possible), Rand argues that it is only by coming to terms with these fundamental matters that we can expect to make progress in ethics, and she believes that we *can* get clear on them.

Rand believes that the perceptual basis for the concept ETHICS is the fact that people govern their choices and actions by reference to ends, standards, principles, and rules. This is something that people do and have done since the beginning of human societies, though the content of the standards and rules has varied widely. Rand analyzes ETHICS (or MORALITY; Rand uses the terms interchangeably) as "a code of values to guide man's choices and actions – the choices and actions that determine the purpose and course of his life." Ethical philosophy, accordingly, "deals with discovering and defining such a code" (VOS 13). This definition is superior to more familiar ones, Rand would argue, because it does justice to the perceived facts (observed behavior) and intellectual history (it specifies an element common to virtually every school of ethical thought) but does *not* foreordain further, controversial philosophical theses (e.g., the falsity of egoism).

The particular fact that gives rise to the concept VALUE is the fact that entities act to secure various items (such items might be material, intellectual, or spiritual). These items are the proper

¹⁸ Do not fear: I use this word simply to designate the part of ethics concerned with act evaluations.

designees (in Rand's terminology, "units") of the concept VALUE. Although other designees (and thus, analyses) of VALUE might be proposed, Rand alleges that it is only this analysis that actually reflects the data given in perception (and nothing more) and that harmonizes with a reality-guided conceptual organization of that data. In other words, it is only this analysis that has a place in a rational, methodical identification and classification of what is.

Yes, there is an English word, "value," and there are likely conditions for its deployment that are discoverable by linguists interested in the semantics and pragmatics of natural language. But on Rand's view, neither the fact that we have this word, nor the fact that there is some semantic/pragmatic explication of it, is enough to warrant the supposition that it connects to a concept that has rational application. Before we can deploy the concept VALUE in descriptive statements, we need to point to something in reality that gives rise to it. And just as we should cease to deploy the concepts PHLOGISTON and WARLOCK (except in storytelling and other ironic contexts) we should cease to deploy the concept VALUE if *it* has no empirical basis. For this reason, Rand would argue that it is methodologically improper to attempt conventional linguistic analysis on our everyday notion of value (cf. VOS 14).

Rand instead counsels us to ask ourselves, "Assuming this word has some rational application, what might it be? What things *out there* might we need to designate and speak of that are in the general neighborhood of our concept of VALUE?" Rand believes that there is a phenomenon that is given in perception and that overlaps with our pre-theoretical notion of value: the simple fact that there are things that people act to attain. This, then, is the rational referent of the word, "value."

Thus, Rand analyzes value as "that which one acts to gain and/or keep" (VOS 16). Once we arrive at this dialectical juncture, we can see that it makes no sense to speak of value apart from a particular beneficiary (i.e., the *agent* who is *acting* to gain and/or keep something), and that it makes no sense to speak of value apart from some goal or purpose (i.e., the thing *gained* and/or *kept*). Also implicit

¹⁹ I refer to the concept of VALUE (e.g.) by typesetting the word "value" in small capitals. I adhere, also, to the conventional use-mention distinction, and so refer to "value," the word, by placing it in American quotation marks.

in this very general account of value, Rand points out, is the existence of a beneficiary and a goal (VOS

16). The existence of a goal, furthermore, implies the existence of both

- (a) some alternative in regard to which success or failure in negotiating this alternative makes a difference to the agent, and
- (b) an agent that is capable of initiating action in pursuit of this goal.

Thus, it also makes no sense to speak of a goal or a purpose where either there is no alternative that confronts the agent, and/or the agent's action does not potentially make a significant difference the agent's fate. The existence of a value implies the existence of some alternative with significance for the agent *and* an agent that is capable of initiating goal-directed action in pursuit of one side of this alternative.

Rand argues that all *living organisms* face a fundamental alternative in light of which their action (potentially) makes a difference. In addition, broadly speaking, living organisms are capable of initiating goal-directed action in the negotiation of this fundamental alternative:

It is only a living organism that faces a constant alternative: the issue of life or death. Life is a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action. If an organism fails in that action, it dies; its chemical elements remain, but its life goes out of existence. It is only the concept of life that makes the concept of value possible. It is only to a living entity that things can be good or evil. (AS 1012-1013)

Because living organisms are the only things that face such an alternative and are capable of meaningful goal-directed action, it follows that living organisms are the only entities who can have goals or purposes, and so also that only living organisms can be valuers. It is the alternative of life and death that makes an entity capable of valuing because without it there would be no subsidiary alternatives that confronted an agent. Without the alternative of life and death, there would be ultimately no reason for acting in one way rather than in another. There would be no significance that would attach to any particular event that transpired, and thus no reason to gain or seek anything. There could be no goals or purposes (VOS 16-17).

Now, on the interpretation of Rand that I favor, there is a particular way in which the requirement of goal-direction (discussed above) applies to human beings²⁰. We *are* able to initiate goal-directed action that makes a difference to our sustenance. But the basic way in which we are capable of initiating action in support of their lives involves *choice*. Before we reason, produce, or trade, we must *choose to do so*.

We must choose in order to be capable of goal-directed action, on Rand's view, because there are no innate goals toward which human beings are oriented. In animals, the capacities for goal-directed action automatically take life as their goal. Humans, by contrast, have evolved the capacity for choice, so that choice becomes a precondition for the capability to exercise life-maintaining capacities.

This is Rand's basic criticism of the moral philosophers with whom she has the most in common: Aristotle, Epicurus, Epictetus, Spinoza, and Herbert Spencer. Rand's former associate, Nathaniel Branden, explains this point in his essay "The Moral Revolution in *Atlas Shrugged*," which was composed under Rand's tutelage:

In their attempts logically to connect the specific values they advocated with their descriptions of man's metaphysical nature, ... [s]ome philosophers ascribed to man, as a metaphysical attribute, a particular desire or conatus; they declared it to be universal and innate; then they stated that an objective ethics, one genuinely based on man's nature, would be one that enabled man to achieve this desire or striving. ... But none of these philosophers ever demonstrated that such desire or striving is universal in man; nor could such a claim be proved. Observe, further, that these philosophers were not so much deducing from man's nature the values man should choose, as claiming to find values pre-existing in man's nature. ... In no sense does Ayn Rand regard any particular value as a metaphysical give, as pre-existing in man or in the universe. (Branden 1964 19-20).

As I understand him, the point that Branden is making here is that there can be no values pre-existing in human nature because human beings do not have as a "metaphysical" (i.e., intrinsic) attribute any particular orientation, desire, striving, *ergon*, function, etc. At least, human beings do not have such

²⁰ This interpretation concerns how to relate Rand's remarks in her late essay, "Causality vs. Duty," to the ethical view outlined in *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Virtue of Selfishness*. I am very grateful to David Kelley for helping me clarify my thoughts on this issue. I am grateful also to Allan Gotthelf, whose aforementioned paper, "The Choice to Value," provoked me to think about these issues more carefully (unfortunately, Prof. Gotthelf does not permit citation of this work). Of course, in taking the interpretative stance that I take, I speak only for myself. Thus, any mistakes that remain in my exposition of Rand's view are my fault.

orientations above and beyond the level of the processes of nutrition and growth, which truly are automatic and unchosen. For Rand, the only way a human being can have some goal or purpose above this level is to *choose* it.

Synthesizing these last two points, we see that it is the existence of an alternative and a human being's choice for one of its "prongs" (since this generates or implements our capacity for goal-directed action) that, jointly, are the necessary and sufficient conditions for the existence of human values.

Given that the fundamental alternative that confronts human beings is the alternative of life or death - self-generated, self-sustaining action or stillness - Rand believes that the fundamental choice is the choice to live. This choice, in part, generates the existence of values. Rand writes:

Life or death is man's only fundamental alternative. To live is his basic act of choice. If he chooses to live, a rational ethics will tell him what principles of action are required to implement his choice. If he does not choose to live, nature will take its course. (PWNI 99).

According to Rand, this choice sets the foundational goal for any human being: life. The choice to live endows otherwise gray facts with the color of value. All values and "oughts" are generated by a particular agent's commitment to this goal. Without this commitment on the part of the agent, the world is simply one big, motivationally inert, normatively empty "is." Rand writes that, "Reality confronts man with a great many 'musts,' but all of them are conditional; the formula of realistic necessity is: 'You must, if - ' and the 'if' stands for a man's choice: ' - if you want to achieve a certain goal'" (PWNI 99).

Life - the dynamic process of self-generated, self-sustaining action - is therefore the foundational goal. For this reason, it is also the proper ultimate value or final end of human action. It is the end that grounds all further chains of means and ends:

It is only an ultimate goal, an end-in-itself, that makes the existence of values possible. Metaphysically, *life* is the only phenomenon that is an end-in-itself: a value gained and kept by a constant process of action. Epistemologically, the concept of 'value' is genetically dependent upon and derived from the antecedent concept of 'life'" (VOS 17-18).

For Rand, life serves the role of the final good sought by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* I:ii. Or, in the terminology of 20th Century British moralists, life is the sole bearer of non-instrumental goodness. Whenever goodness is ascribed to something, it is because that thing conduces to life.

Rand writes that, “Metaphysically, *life* is the only phenomenon that is an end-in-itself.” By this, I think she means that, in embracing the “life” prong of the life-or-death alternative, one embraces the continued existence of oneself and of one’s capacity to value and of one’s capacity to achieve any other values. Life is not only a precondition for the acquisition or achievement of any other ends (e.g., cultivating good character, mastering a foreign language, bowling a 300-pt. game); it actually is these other ends, in the sense that it is constituted by them. Achieving these other ends *is* the dynamic process of self-sustaining and self-generated action.

Rand also writes that, “Epistemologically, the concept of ‘value’ is genetically dependent upon and derived from the antecedent concept of ‘life’.” By this, I think she means that, it is only from the observation of *living entities in the pursuit of their own lives* that we encounter the facts that are the units of the concept VALUE (and so the referents of the word, “value”). Without the life-oriented action of paramecia, trees, chicken, and so forth, there could be no concept of value, because nothing would be acting to gain or keep anything.

We have now determined Rand’s basic analysis of the conditions for value as well as her specification of the final good. But it is important to note, as Rand interpreters Douglas Den Uyl and Douglas Rasmussen do, that, “All end-oriented behavior ultimately aims at life, but life as such, in the abstract, does not exist. For any given living being, then, it is *[its] life as the kind of thing it is* that constitutes its ultimate end or value” (Den Uyl and Rasmussen 67; emphasis mine).

Rand’s view that *its life as a human being* constitutes the ultimate end for any human being dictates the entire content of her normative theory. As already implied, Rand argues that this ultimate end is the standard of value, or criterion of goodness. As Rand interpreters David Kelley and William Thomas put the point, anything that satisfies “a condition whose fulfillment significantly enhances an

organism's ability to preserve itself" is good (Thomas and Kelley 70). Or as Rand herself writes, "All that which is proper to the life of a rational being is the good; all that which destroys it is the evil" (AS 1014 emphasizes mine). Applying this formulation to the central problem the normative ethics of behavior – the formulation of a criterion of right action – we can say that Rand believes that an act is right if and only if the act contributes to the survival of the act's agent. In other words, a right action is one that tends to promote the good, as it was described above.

Since the only tenable, empirically-based explications of the central ethical concepts involve essential reference to the life of the organism, we see that we have to consider the actual conditions of the organism's life in order to understand what is good and evil (or right and wrong) for it. This consideration of the conditions of the organism's life will involve grasping – and paying active and deliberate attention to – the fundamental natural features of the organism. The normative ethics of behavior, for Rand, is a naturalistic, empirical species of philosophical inquiry. Although the basic facts, she would allege, are available to any human adult, she has in principle invited biologists, social scientists, and historians to participate in the enterprise of ethics (Richard Rorty, despite appearances, will not be able to regard this development as a victory).

Specifically, since morality (as we established at the outset) is a code of values to *guide* the choices and actions that determine the purpose and course of a human life, a moral theory must offer such guidance in a form that is consistent with basic facts about human psychology. Human beings are not like plants or other animals; their constitution is physically and psychologically unique. Specifically, since the world is so very large and so thickly propertied, and since human beings must live in this world and make choices without the aid of failsafe, reflexive instincts, *human beings must deal with their surroundings by conceptual thought.*

Moreover, since our mental capacities are limited (we can only deal with a small number of mental units at one time), a morality must be formulated in terms that are congruent with the nature of

this faculty, including its limitations. For this reason, a moral code must observe the principle of unit-economy, i.e., minimize the number of mental units with which one has to deal:

Whether the units with which one deals are percepts or concepts, the range of what man can hold in the focus of his conscious awareness at any given moment, is limited. The essence, therefore, of man's incomparable cognitive power is the ability to reduce a vast amount of information to a minimal number of units ... (ITOE 63)

Rand would argue that this principle of unit-economy precludes the possibility of an ethics which counsels one to be a survival accountant, to perform a quasi-mathematical evaluation of one's options at each point where one faces an alternative. This kind of mental arithmetic is literally impracticable (imagine trying to decide whether to have roast beef or salad for lunch using this method!).

Instead, the principle of unit-economy naturally leads one to an ethic of principles.

In order to have any kind of effective control over reality, we must sort circumstances, events, and actions into general types, and deal with them at this level. Otherwise, we could have no grasp, in advance, of the consequences that we might bring about in performing a given action; the "cognitive load" of the simplest choices would be too much for us to bear if we proceeded on a perceptual-level, case-by-case basis.

For these reasons, although survival is the standard – the "abstract principle that serves as a measurement or gauge to guide a man's choices in the achievement of a concrete, specific purpose" – a more detailed set of principles is required to clearly and helpfully guide human choices. Of course, each of these principles must be derived from and consistent with the standard – it must be genuinely conducive to the ultimate end. But principles, such as "Be honest" or "Take responsibility for one's own thinking," allow one to consistently act to promote and protect one's own life, without the burden of analyzing all the recondite details of each situation. (This, I think, is the kernel of truth in Kant's deontology, Richard Brandt's rule-utilitarianism, and the virtue-ethics of Rosalind Hursthouse and Michael Slote).

It is important to note that, since the principles which Rand recommends as guides to action are recommended and justified *on the basis of their expected contribution to survival*, where principle-observance and survival diverge, one must take the latter path. In other words, Rand cannot recommend these principles as commandments or duties because of the manner in which she has derived them. In situations where the principles do not apply at all, or where they must be implemented in a novel manner, one must appreciate this and respond accordingly. The principles are cognitive guides for evaluational thinking: condensations of inductively validated knowledge about the world. Fundamentally, they are guides to effectively achieving and implementing the fundamental value of life.

Very briefly, I will describe the content generated by this approach.

The specific principles that Rand discusses are the ones which she believes are conducive to this end. Her principles take the form of values and virtues; the values are the things that we must nourish and protect because of their intimate connection to our survival. The virtues are the character traits and habits of action that reliably result in the achievement of these values.

Rand discusses three basic values - which she describes as “the means to and the realization of one's ultimate value, one's own life” (VOS 27). These values are reason, purpose, and self-esteem. The most important of these is reason; its corresponding virtue is rationality.

For Rand, “reason” denotes the *active, self-directed, inductive, conceptual* faculty that differentiates and integrates the data provided by man's senses. Reason generates knowledge - the conceptual awareness of facts - which is essential for efficacious thought or action²¹. To value reason means to value “the integrated, self-directed, open-ended acquisition of conceptual knowledge, by means of observation and logical integration” (Thomas and Kelley, 105). Reason, on Rand's view, is man's basic means of survival.

Man cannot survive except through his mind. He comes on earth unarmed. His brain is his only weapon. Animals obtain food by force. Man has no claws, no fangs, no horns, no great strength

²¹ Rand described knowledge as the awareness of relationships among entities within a specific context (ITOE 35).

of muscle. He must plant his food or hunt it. To plant, he needs a process of thought. To hunt, he needs weapons, and to make weapons – a process of thought. From the simplest necessity to the highest ... abstraction, from the wheel to the skyscraper, everything we are and everything we have comes from a single attribute of man – the function of his reasoning mind (FH 672).

To exercise reason to its fullest potential, one must be motivated to use it, confident in its output (one's judgments), and perseverant in its application, in spite of adverse circumstances such as confusion or anxiety. In this manner, the value of reason implies the values of purpose and self-esteem mentioned earlier. To value purpose and self-esteem is to value an important precondition for obtaining knowledge, and therefore, for acting.

Rand claims that the emotional reward for holding these values, for living virtuously, is personal happiness – as she puts it, “a state of non-contradictory joy – a joy without penalty or guilt, a joy that does not clash with any of your values” (AS 1022). This happiness, in the experiential sense, is a “complex admixture of positive feelings such as joy, confidence, excitement, affection, accomplishment, and pleasure” (Thomas and Kelley 61). It is not to be monistically reduced to any single one of these components; it is an emotional summation. In saying that happiness is man's highest moral purpose, Rand is taking the “phenomenological” perspective on success in pursuit of the ultimate end, survival:

The maintenance of life and the pursuit of happiness are not two separate issues. To hold one's own life as one's ultimate value, and one's own happiness as one's highest moral purpose are two aspects of the same achievement. Existentially, the activity of pursuing rational goals is the activity of maintaining one's life; psychologically, its result, reward, and concomitant is an emotional state of happiness (VOS 32).

With Rand's conditions of value established, her final good specified, and her behavioral ethics summarized, we are ready to approach again the objectivity of values.

III. The Objectivity of Values

So how and why are values “objective”? When Rand writes that “the good is objective” and that her theory is the “objective theory of value,” what does she mean (CUI 23)? We can now answer this

question by looking to see whether any of the senses of “objectivity” that we have discussed can be applied to values.

Recall the metaphysical concept of objectivity specified by MI1, and described by O(m):

O(m): an existent is objective if and only if it exists and has the properties that it does independent of (any particular) epistemic subjects, their attributes, and their actions.

This concept applies to things that, in Rand's words, exist “independently of consciousness, the wishes or feelings of any perceiver” (FNI 22). When one asserts that reality is objective, one asserts that “facts are facts, independent of man's feelings, wishes, hopes, or fears ...” (VOR, 4). To understand that reality is objective is the “recognition of the fact that reality exists independent of any perceiver's consciousness” (FNI 22; VOR 18).

Although we established early-on that this root-sense of mind-independence cannot account for the objectivity of Rand's objective theory of value, we might at least wonder whether values are objective in this sense: are values, on Rand's theory, mind-independent facts that exist independent of any particular perceiver's wishes mental attitudes and affective states – things that exist and have the properties that they do independent of any particular epistemic subject?

My answer is, “Well, maybe.” I think that the application of this concept to human values is problematic.

We can certainly say this: O(m) is applicable with certainty to the values of plants and animals (at least to the extent that they automatically seek certain goals and ends). In addition, we can say that the requirements of biological life and the conditions of human survival themselves are entirely mind-independent in the sense described by O(m). For these are clearly things that cannot be modified or changed by acts of consciousness. Even further: whether or not some particular action is instrumental in the satisfaction of such needs is also an objective fact in this sense.

More concretely, certain personal traits of character, habits of action, and act-types can be shown scientifically to contribute to an individual's own life. Rand holds that it is demonstrable that (e.g.)

rationality – “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” – conduces to one's own sustenance. On Rand's view, anyone who investigates the matter inductively will find that people who depart from the acceptance of reason as their means of dealing with reality jeopardize their own lives in proportion to their departure. For instance: people who make critical life choices on the basis of Tarot cards, astrological predictions, or the revealed strictures of some holy text, will less reliably satisfy their own needs.

In this sense, even many of the basic values are mind-independent in the manner of O(m) in that they reflect facts about *human needs* and *what will satisfy them* that cannot be changed or negated by anyone's emotions or beliefs. Even if a person passionately believes that (e.g.) a reliance on mystical techniques is the best means to gaining knowledge and discovering values - even if they are skilled at defending this view in philosophical argument - they are wrong. Reality is the ultimate restricting factor on human choices, the ultimate arbiter of whether a thing can be chosen and pursued.

This said, we must recall another condition of human values: I said earlier that the basic way in which we are capable of initiating goal-directed action is by choosing to live, and I emphasized that we must choose to live in order to be capable of goal-directed action²². If this is correct, we see that, in order for there to be human goals or purposes, there must be both a significant alternative that confronts an agent *and* a choice on the agent's behalf for one of this alternative's disjuncts. Since, in order for there to be a value, there must be something that an agent acts to gain and/or keep, this choice is also a necessary condition for the existence of values. (VOS 16). On the most usual metaphysic, a choice is an act of consciousness. It cannot occur "independent of any perceiver's consciousness." So, it would seem to follow that values – for any particular agent – cannot exist in absence of this act of choice and thus that values cannot be objective in the metaphysical sense of O(m).

²² Naturally, one might insist (on philosophical rather than textual grounds) that human beings have the capacity for goal-directed action from the start because they have the *capacity* for choice. If one takes this line, I think that Rand's views in “Causality vs. Duty” must be seen as altered views rather than as an elaboration of the theory described in *The Virtue of Selfishness*. So far as I can see, this *would* render values themselves objective in the sense of O(m). This is a difficult issue, and I have nothing further to contribute to its solution.

I think that certain passages from Rand suggest that (e.g.) rationality can only be a value for some particular agent if that agent has chosen to live. For instance, she writes:

To live is [a person's] basic act of choice. If he chooses to live, a rational ethics will tell him what principles of action are required to implement his choice. If he does not choose to live, nature will take its course. Reality confronts man with a great many 'musts,' but all of them are conditional; the formula of realistic necessity is: 'You must, if -' and the 'if' stands for man's choice. (PWNI 99)

She is in any case emphatic that there are no categorical imperatives, because all values are partially constituted by goals and purposes, and there are no goals or purposes that exist in human beings as intrinsic attributes (PWNI 98-9). In the human case, goals and purposes are generated only by an act of choice²³.

Other passages seem to support the even more radical view that, unless an agent actually pursues a given item, it cannot be a value for that agent. Consider the following selection from “What is Capitalism?”, where Rand denies that one man should attempt to make another man pursue his own good by means of physical force:

... an attempt to achieve the good by physical force is a monstrous contradiction which negates morality at its root by destroying man's capacity to recognize the good, i.e., his capacity to value. ... A value which one is forced to accept at the price of surrendering one's mind, is not a value to anyone; the forcibly mindless can neither judge nor choose nor value. An attempt to achieve the good by force is like an attempt to provide man with a picture gallery at the price of cutting out his eyes. Values cannot exist (cannot be valued) outside the full context of a man's life, needs, goals, and *knowledge*. (PWNI 23).

If a man must recognize (for himself) the good in order for it to be the good, it would seem that one human being cannot truthfully say to another (where x is some subsidiary value), “You know, x is good,” if the latter person has not chosen x . An agent's pursuit at this micro-level seems necessary to fix a thing as a value.

²³ It is a separate and interesting question whether judgment - a conscious, propositional recognition of the fact that a thing would contribute to an individual's life - is necessary to fix a particular thing as a value. If someone

Of course, this issue is not settled squarely by the text, and an alternative interpretation might posit that, after an agent has made the choice to live, all the things that would figure as the implementation of this choice become bonafide values for that agent. There are some passages that also suggest this latter view. For instance, Rand says that, “My morality, the morality of reason, is contained in a single axiom: existence exists - and in a single choice: to live. The rest proceeds from these” (AS 1018). This quote might be taken to mean that, if a person makes the choice to live, then the things that would conduce to and implement this choice become values for that individual, despite their not having been chosen individually. On the other hand, it could mean that, if a person makes the choice to live, he or she also *does choose* – in that act – all of the things that would conduce to life. But on either of these readings, the passage would be evidence for Rand believing that rationality does not have to be chosen (individually) in order for it to count as a value for a person.

On the other hand, this passage might mean something more modest: if one chooses to live, and one at least prizes reason and some of the other fundamental values, one will be led by the logic of this choice to *see* the things that conduce to life and *choose* them in due course. This would be congruent with a reading of the passage from “What is Capitalism?” on which the agent's independent judgment and choice is necessary for any particular thing to count as a value. And *yet*, if we are adequately sensitive to the difference between (a) a value being actively *forced* upon a person and (b) the person not actively choosing it, the passage from “What is Capitalism?” might be read in a way that is congruent with one of the interpretations in the preceding paragraph.

I have no solution to this puzzle; I can only encourage readers to examine it more closely. However it is decided, our main conclusion on the application of metaphysical objectivity to values is unaffected: neither values nor evaluative claims are objective in the sense of O(m), though the requirements of life and the conditions of value-able-ness are objective.

chooses life, and chooses a particular thing (e.g., to be rational), but does not judge that being rational will conduce to his life, is the thing a value?

I think it is also obvious, now, that MI2 – the view that, for Rand, values are objective in a (stronger) Moorean sense so that they might exist in a world that contained no living organisms capable of initiating goal-directed action – is simply false. The existence of a beneficiary and a goal are necessary conditions for the existence of value, and if there were no living organisms, it is hard to see how these conditions could be met. It might be objected that Moore’s beautiful world probably (though he does not say) contains plants, which do meet the conditions for the existence of values (for the plants, speaking distributively). But this neglects the most philosophically misguided feature of Moore’s example, namely that he attempts to assess not the amount of value-able things (from the perspective of organisms) in the worlds but the non-instrumental values of the worlds themselves. (Note that he is not even assessing their value as objects of contemplation or thought, but simply querying, “Which of these worlds should exist?”). Well, until we have begun the colonization of other planets, we must say that it is misguided to assess the values of worlds (let alone their non-instrumental value, which in this case obviously divorces them from goals and beneficiaries).

Let us turn, then, to the second main concept of OBJECTIVITY, the concept discussed in section II.B. This sort of objectivity applies to the status of conceptual functioning and its products. If a person recognizes “the fact that a perceiver's (man's) consciousness must acquire knowledge of reality by certain means (reason) in accordance with certain rules (logic)” and applies this realization to their own cognitive functioning, their thinking and its products can be called objective. As we saw, in order to achieve this – in order to apply this realization to one's own thinking – one must volitionally initiate thought (i.e., one must initiate the acts of observing, regarding, isolating, omitting, integrating, and uniting) and one must aim at the truth (i.e., one must be guided only by facts). In other words, one must *be* epistemologically active and one must conform to mind-independent reality.

If we take “values” and “goods” as a short-hand for evaluative judgments and goodness-identifications, respectively, then these *are* objective in this epistemological sense (though in one of the parasitic epistemological senses discussed in section II.B.2, “Further Applications”).

Values, on Rand's view, are features of reality, though they are special kinds of features. In the human case, their existence requires a person (a beneficiary) who has chosen to live, and some attainable object that would conduce to or promote that agent's life. If this relationship holds – if all the conditions are filled – we can truthfully say of some thing (e.g., spinach) or some trait of character (e.g., honesty) that it has a value-status, (in this case) that it is *good*. If this relationship fails to obtain, we cannot. Whether or not it does obtain *must be discovered by an individual who exercises epistemological objectivity*.

For Rand, values are another fact of reality that can only be identified by a particular method of thought, i.e., volitional adherence to reality and all the more local methods that comprise it. Just as waiting to be struck down by the truth or “turning inward” will result in the erroneous identification of the nature of medium-sized dry goods, these methods will also result in erroneous evaluative identifications.

Rand does not illustrate in detail the process of thought that would result in a particular epistemologically objective evaluative judgment, e.g. “Honesty is the best policy” (cf. ITOE 75). But to arrive at such a judgment, it is obvious that one must not only form concepts correctly. One must also put them together into a proposition correctly. And, after forming the concepts of HONESTY and GOOD correctly, one must gather information about honest acts, one must initiate some kind of inductive procedure for correlating these acts with certain consequences, one must identify these consequences as causally correlated with certain further ends, and one must identify these ends as good. In order to carry this out with full epistemological objectivity, one must have some standards of evidence and guidelines for the predication of ethical attributes. Although Rand does not offer us an account of these things, I think it is fair to assume that – however this process goes – being epistemologically active and reality-focused will govern the process in the same way that they govern concept-formation.

We have discovered, then, that MI1 and MI2 are false, and also that values are objective in the epistemological sense specified by EO. But is this all there is to the objectivity of values? To answer this question, we must return to the enigmatic passages from “What is Capitalism?”. There, Rand writes:

There are in essence, three schools of thought on the nature of the good: the intrinsic, the subjective, and the objective. The *intrinsic* theory holds that the good is inherent in certain things or actions as such, regardless of their context and consequences, regardless of any benefit or injury they may cause to the actors and subjects involved. It is a theory that divorces the concept of ‘good’ from beneficiaries, and the concept of ‘value’ from valuer and purpose – claiming that the good is good in, by, and of itself.

The *subjectivist* theory holds that the good bears no relation to the facts of reality, that it is the product of a man’s consciousness, created by his feelings, desires, ‘intuitions,’ or whims, and that it is merely an arbitrary postulate or an emotional commitment.

The intrinsic theory holds that the good resides in some sort of reality, independent of man’s consciousness; the subjectivist theory holds that the good resides in man’s consciousness, independent of reality.

The *objective* theory holds that the good is neither an attribute of ‘things in themselves’ nor of man’s emotional states, but an evaluation of the facts of reality by man’s consciousness according to a rational standard of value. (Rational, in this context, means: derived from the facts of reality and validated by a process of reason.) The objective theory holds that the good is an aspect of reality in relation to man – and that it must be discovered, not invented, by man. Fundamental to an objective theory of values is the question: Of value to whom and for what? (CUI 21-22)

The enigmatic element in this passage, as we saw earlier, is the strong metaphysical cast of Rand’s descriptions of the three schools²⁴. Rand appears to contrast the schools, not in terms of their

²⁴ I cannot help but note another interesting thing about this passage: it is Rand’s first recognition of anything like an intrinsicist school of ethics. Earlier in the same year (February 1965), she wrote that, “Morality has been the monopoly of mystics, i.e., of subjectivists, for centuries - a monopoly reinforced and reaffirmed by the neo-mystics of modern philosophy. The clash between the two dominant schools of ethics, the mystical and the social, is only a clash between personal subjectivism and social subjectivism: one substitutes the supernatural for the objective, the other substitutes the collective for the objective” (VOR 19). By November, Rand makes a different, more thorough, diagnosis of these trends. She incorporates the grain of truth in her previous analysis: “in practice, the proponents of the intrinsic and the subjectivist schools meet and blend. (They blend in terms of their psycho-epistemology as well: by what means do the moralists of the intrinsic school discover their transcendental ‘good,’ if not by means of special, non-rational intuitions and revelations, i.e., by means of their feelings?)” (CUI 23). I conjecture that Rand’s greater familiarity with Hume, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and the American pragmatists (all of whom are singled out for abuse in 1961’s *For the New Intellectual*) led her to neglect intrinsicists like Sidgwick, Moore, and W. D. Ross.

epistemological methods, but in terms of their stance on the *ontological* nature of values, i.e., on the basis of what type of entities they take values to be, and where (in the world) they think values are.

The intrinsicist thinks they are “inherent in certain things or actions as such,” that the “good resides in some sort of reality, independent of man's consciousness.” The subjectivist takes them to be the “product[s] of man's consciousness,” and thinks that “the good resides in man's consciousness, independent of reality.” The question is then, whether the intrinsicness, subjectivity, or objectivity of values can be said to *consist* in part in this metaphysical status. Can values, as OR would have it, be said to be objective *because* they are “an aspect of reality in relation to man,” versus inherent in nature or the pure product of consciousness?

In one portion of *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, Leonard Peikoff appears to take this very interpretation²⁵. Peikoff writes:

Moral value does not pertain to reality alone or to consciousness alone. It arises because of a certain kind of living organism – a volitional, conceptual organism – sustains a certain relationship to an external world. Both these factors – man and the world, or human consciousness and reality – are essential in this context. The good, accordingly, is neither intrinsic nor subjective, but objective. (OPAR 242)

Of course, it is difficult to know the function of the “accordingly” in Peikoff’s last sentence. But a naïve reading of this passage might have it that values are objective because they are ontologically dependent upon a relation between mind and world, human consciousness and reality.

There is a problem with this last thought, though (later, it will emerge that my own view has this problem, too). If we say (in the spirit of the proposed reading of Peikoff) that values are objective because they are ontologically dependent on a relation between mind and world, we are stuck with saying that a plant’s values are not objective in the relevant sense: for plants lack minds. This problem, though,

²⁵ At another point, it should be noted, Peikoff argues that the epistemological sense is the central sense of the concept, objectivity. He writes: “People often speak of 'objective reality.' In this usage, which is harmless, 'objective' means 'independent of consciousness.' The actual purpose of the concept, however, is to be found not in metaphysics but in epistemology. Strictly speaking, existents are not objective; they simply are. It is minds, and specifically conceptual processes, that are objective - or nonobjective” (OPAR 117).

is easily avoided by putting the ontological relation in slightly different terms: we might say that values are objective because they are dependent on a relation between an *agent* and an *alternative*. This appears to be Peikoff's view in another passage that Tara Smith cites in explanation of her own view (although she seems to endorse a different view in her footnotes; cf. the already-cited passage at Smith 2000 120 fn. 30). Smith writes:

By saying that values are objective, then, I mean that “[o]bjects and actions are good *to* man and *for* the sake of reaching a specific goal.” [OPAR 241] Both aspects are crucial to objectivity: values reflect facts, but they reflect facts as evaluated by human beings, relative to the goal of live. (Smith 2000 97)

I think that there are two problems with this view, which amounts to the thesis OR.

OR: on Rand's view, values are objective because they are ontologically relational – because they require both an *agent* and an *alternative*.

First, we attribute to Rand no small amount of sloppiness in regard to her (chosen) technical vocabulary. Recall that Rand officially recognizes two senses of objectivity: one metaphysical, one epistemological. As we saw, Rand holds that “Metaphysically, [objectivity] is the recognition of the fact that reality exists independent of any perceiver's consciousness” (VOR 18). If she maintains this OR sense of metaphysical objectivity in addition to the one just discussed, it would seem that she uses the word, “objective” to characterize two, different sorts of metaphysical status: (1) mind-independence, and (2) the product of a mind-reality interaction. Note that these sorts of metaphysical status are mutually exclusive. At the very least, this terminological choice would be too confusing to aid philosophical inquiry.

Second, I believe that this dimension or ground of objectivity is unnecessary for the interpretation of Rand. If we simply hold that values are objective because they are identified and pursued by means of conceptual knowledge, and note that intrinsic theories' failure to recognize this is

rooted in an ontological mistake (their denial of the relational nature of value), we have a view that can make good sense of Rand's text.

To do this, we read the passage from "What is Capitalism?" with a focus on the methods of thought that underlie each of the schools (intrinsic, subjective, objective), i.e., the means of ethical knowledge that each implicitly endorses. If we do this, we can read Rand as simply laying out the trichotomy of conceptual functioning that we discussed in section II.B.2, except that this time, she is showing how each model of conceptual functioning dictates a corollary doctrine about the nature of moral knowledge. The source of the objectivity of values is that evaluative thought and judgment must be epistemologically objective in the sense specified by O(e): moral values can only be pursued by means of self-initiated thought that is purposefully based on evaluation according to a standard, and so in accordance (ultimately) with the facts.

We might work out this interpretation as follows:

The intrinsicist again believes that we can perceive value-facts directly by non-sensory or extra-sensory means (cf. ITOE 53). We do not have to be epistemologically active and we do not have to ascertain the consequences of the pursuit or attainment of any specific ends. We can simply stare at reality and let it 'imprint' moral knowledge upon us. If "the good is inherent in certain things or actions as such, regardless of their context and consequences," this might be, indeed, all we need to do. Deliberation about means and ends is irrelevant: arbitrary duties can be perceived passively and directly through the Third Eye of Reason (to put the point emphatically).

Similarly, the subjectivist believes that we can turn inward and discover moral knowledge (insofar as there is such a thing) in our own whims and feelings. The subjectivist believes that our process of desiring or willing literally creates value-facts, that they are "the product of a man's consciousness," and so that no focus on the external world is necessary. The subjectivist holds, accordingly, that some unrestrained act of consciousness will suffice for the attainment of moral knowledge (e.g., we identify the things that inspire in us a certain sense of approbation, or what satisfies

our whims, or what we like; or, on a more radical way of thinking, we “create” values through criticism, theorizing difference, or telling stories).

The Objectivist, of course, understands that moral knowledge, like all knowledge, can only come from “an evaluation of the facts of reality by man’s consciousness according to a rational standard of value. (Rational, in this context, means: derived from the facts of reality and validated by a process of reason)” (VOR 18). Accordingly, the Objectivist incorporates into the Objectivist theory the insight that one must be epistemologically active and reality-oriented in order to arrive at moral knowledge.

The resources of this approach can be illustrated by considering this particularly thorny passage (thorny because it seems to mix ontology and epistemology):

The objective theory holds that the good is an aspect of reality in relation to man – and that it must be discovered, not invented, by man. Fundamental to an objective theory of values is the question: Of value to whom and for what? (CUI 21-22)

Of course, the Objective theory does hold that the good is an aspect of reality in relation to man, but this fact is not a source of the objectivity of values. Values are objective because they must be and can only be discovered by human beings that self-regulate as epistemological objectivity requires. The references in this passage to valuer (“man,” “to whom”) and purpose (“for what”) specify facts that an agent must identify conceptually. These facts are elements of the context of action that a moral agent needs to consider. This also explains why Rand places specific emphasis on the fact that the intrinsicist “divorces ... the concept of ‘value’ from valuer and purpose” and the fact that the subjectivist “holds that the good bears no relation to the facts of reality.” Both of these schools ignore facts that are relevant to correctly cognizing value.

This, then, is my suggestion.

Its two major defects – so far as I can see – are (a) that it renders (as one Peikoff-inspired account also did) the values of plants and certain animals non-objective, because plants and certain animals do not engage in truth-oriented, method-governed conceptual thought, and (b) it attributes a grammatical

peculiarity to Rand, because she should really not say that value is objective, but that on her theory, evaluative judgments and cognition pertaining to values are objective (and, that her theory itself was formulated in accordance with epistemological objectivity).

To this first objection, I respond that, if Rand restricts the main concept of objectivity to human value-pursuit, as she restricted the epistemological concept of objectivity to human thought, this is to be expected²⁶. As many have pointed out, Rand was led to technical philosophy by thinking about human political, social, and ethical issues. Her primary concern was always with the human case. As illustration of this, consider the passage in “Philosophy: Who Needs It?” where she writes that the questions that motivate philosophy itself are, “Where am I? How do I know it? What should I do?” (PWN1 2). Clearly, these questions only make sense in the human case.

The second objection is, of course, more substantial. Yet, when we look at the few passages where Rand actually says, “the good is objective,” I think that my interpretation makes decent sense of them.

Since *the good is objective*, it has to be defined in terms of abstract principles covering a wide variety of concretes; it is up to every individual to apply these principles to the particular goals and problems of his own life (ARL 374; emphasis mine).

If one knows that the *good is objective* – i.e., determined by the nature of reality, but to be discovered by man’s mind – one knows that an attempt to achieve the good by physical force ... negates morality at its root ... (CUI 23).

In the first case, she means to say that, since the good can only be identified by epistemologically objective cognition, it has to be defined in a manner that is consistent with effective cognitive functioning. In the second case, Rand is emphasizing that, since the good can only be identified by epistemologically objective cognition, to abuse, compromise, or damage the mind (the faculty of such cognition) destroys ones ability to be moral.

²⁶ However, it must be noted that plant and animal values are clearly objective in the sense specified by O(m), while human values are not.

Of course, Rand includes this troubling phrase, “i.e., determined by the nature of reality, but to be discovered by man’s mind.” And it must be admitted that my interpretation does some violence to this remark. But, on the whole, I think it is more charitable to say (a) Rand claimed “the good is objective” and “[my theory is] the objective theory of value,” when she really meant “the good can only be identified by self-initiated, reality-governed conceptual thought” and “my theory is the only theory that appropriately reflects man’s epistemic nature,” than to say (b) she invented a new metaphysical concept of objectivity that she never explicitly accounted for, and said “the good is objective,” anyway, knowing full-well the conventional connotation of this phrase. (Remember: on the conventional reading, this sentence gets a truth-value of “0” on Rand’s theory).

A Final Observation:

After reading this paper, I can imagine that someone with more conventional, “analytic” views might say, “Hey, I don’t care about all this weird epistemological stuff that is internal to Objectivism. But you just destroyed all the sympathy I had for Ayn Rand, ‘cause the whole reason I liked her was that I *thought* she was saying that values are totally mind-independent and therefore just as ontologically respectable as numbers and protons! But they aren’t!”

In response, it can be pointed out that Rand’s theory, though radically unlike Moore’s, shows us that values have all the “fixity” that one could want (cf. Moore 1922 28-29). That is: her account is in any case a form of moral realism. We can make true evaluative judgments concerning the actions and ends of others. We can do this because most people have chosen life, and it is a normal, natural, scientific fact whether some subordinate action or end will be conducive to life. The right and the good are therefore both determinate and, within a certain range, universal. But for Rand, values are only objective insofar as they are the products of correct conceptual functioning, and her theory of values is objective only insofar as it is the result of objective thinking and congruent with a correct model of conceptual functioning.

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