

## Ayn Rand's Egoism: Theory and Analysis

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Ayn Rand was a Russian-born American philosopher, novelist, and playwright, whose interpretation of ethical egoism is one of the most important interpretations of this theory. Rand is a proponent of intellectual egoism, and rationalism is a fundamental element in her ethical theory. This article attempts to review, analyze, and criticize her interpretation of ethical egoism. Additionally, an ethical theory known as ego-altruism will be introduced in opposition to Rand's theory. Ego-altruism proposes that the pivot of ethics is to maintain balance and equilibrium between the self and others.

**Key words:** ego-altruism, ethical egoism, Ayn Rand, ethics.

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### Introduction

Ethical egoism is one of the most important ethical theories in the field of normative ethics. According to this theory, the sole ethical criterion is self-interest; that is, it is man's ethical duty to maximize his own benefit in any given situation.

Different interpretations have been offered for ethical egoism. Ayn Rand believes that man should not sacrifice himself for others, and should not sacrifice others for himself either. According to this interpretation, the primary and natural goal of any living creature is to protect itself. The ethical value of each deed is also defined based on the same goal. Of all living creatures, ethics only applies to man, since he has the ability to choose among valuable and invaluable goals.

When looking for a criterion to determine whether a given action is ethical, it seems that the most prominent issue we face is ethical egoism. Since in many cases, it is a difficult and painstaking task to determine the boundaries between ethical egoism and ethical altruism, it is

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crucially important to study ethical egoism. Since Rand provides strong arguments in favor of ethical egoism and presents most of her philosophical viewpoints in the form of novels—a psychologically influential and attractive medium—it is truly essential to study her theory of egoism in the field of ethics.

This article primarily tries to examine the extent to which Rand's ethical egoism can be defended. There is no doubt that her theory has a number of strengths, but do these strengths overcome its weaknesses? And if ethical egoism is refuted, then what is an appropriate alternative to this theory? Rand shoots serious criticisms at ethical altruism, which need to be considered. It seems that even by refuting ethical egoism, it is not easy to prove ethical altruism. Therefore, if ethical egoism is rejected, a suitable alternative needs to be presented.

To provide answers for the above investigation, we will provide a brief review of Rand's ethical egoism before studying and criticizing her theory.

### **1. Rand's Biography and Works**

Ayn Rand was born on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1905 in Russia and passed away on March 6<sup>th</sup>, 1982. Her full name is Alissa Zinovievna Rosenbaum and Ayn Rand is its abbreviated form (Badhwar and Long 2012). Rand was a philosopher who wrote screenplays, plays, and novels, along with philosophical and academic works. She also published articles in the fields of politics, economics, and ethics in newspapers such as *The New York Times* (Burns 2009, 4-5).

It is important to take into account that a great deal of Rand's philosophy is based on her own experiences. Living in Russia and witnessing the revolution, as well as her immigrating to the US, greatly influenced her thoughts (Burns 2009, 33).

Rand's works have received a lot of attention and have become among best-selling literary works. Every year one hundred thousand copies of her works are sold; that is, more than twenty-five million copies thus far. Her unique interpretation of man and her philosophy for life have changed the lives of thousands of her readers and inspired philosophical movements that have influenced American culture. Rand has also influenced many other philosophers, economists, psychologists, and historians.

Besides her academic works, Rand wrote novels in which she implicitly expressed her philosophical and ethical ideas. Using the medium of the novel, which is more attractive than academic texts and is better understood by the readers, is an important strength for her ethical thought. High sales of Rand's novels throughout the world, and particularly in the US, is significant. In 2008, eight hundred thousand copies of her novels *Atlas Shrugged*, *We: The Living*, *Fountainhead*,

and *Anthem* were sold altogether (Burns 2009, 1-2). Among her novels, the most outstanding is *Atlas Shrugged*.

Her most important academic works are “For the New Intellectual,” “The Virtue of Selfishness,” “Capitalism: the Unknown Ideal,” “Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology,” “The Romantic Manifesto,” and “Return of the Primitive Anti-Industrial Revolution.”

## **2. Rand's Ethical Egoism**

Rand is one of the most serious critics of ethical altruism. In her opinion, altruism is an ethical system in which man cannot follow his goals and wishes and only exists to serve others. Rand puts forth various criticisms of altruism before introducing her own ethical system.

### **2.1. Definition of Ethics and Criterion of Moral Value**

Since Rand believes in freedom of choice for man, she maintains that ethics solely belongs to him (1984, 12). In her view, ethics is a system of values that directs our decisions and deeds and determines our goals in life (1964b, 10). The scope of ethics in Rand's literature is quite vast and in many cases she speaks of ethics as if it covers all aspects of life.

In her interviews, for instance, Rand defines politics as the study of humans' communications with each other, which is based on a specific ethical system (2009, 242). Elsewhere Rand mentions that ethics is applicable in all aspects of human life (1984, 12).

To determine the criterion of moral value, Rand studied the nature of living creatures. In her opinion, the concepts of values and good and evil are only applicable to living creatures (2008, 20). Rand considers the “life” of living creatures to be the main criterion in determining their moral value; that is, living creatures face choices which make possible the fulfillment of the concept of value. The most important dilemma faced by a living creature is that of life or death (1964b, 12). Therefore, in Rand's system of thought, the only thing that is valuable in itself is a creature's life—and other issues are valuable only if they are in line with the creature's life.

Rand believes that the concept of life is deeply connected to the concept of practice. In her opinion, there needs to be a sort of activity by each living creature to preserve its own life. Thus, the creature's life is a process of self-sustaining and self-generating; if it fails to perform appropriate actions to survive, it will die and its only remnants will be chemical elements (1961a, 97-98). Based on this, Rand defines value as something one endeavors to achieve and then preserve (1990, 77). The key point in understanding value is its connection with action. Rand believes that values are always the subject matter of deeds. One can introduce issues such as money, education, and family as values only if

these issues become practical goals, and actions are performed to achieve and preserve them (2008, 13).

As mentioned earlier, to determine the value of each living thing, Rand studies the nature of that living creature. It is therefore necessary to review her analysis of the nature of living creatures and their corresponding values.

## **2.2. The Criterion of the Value of Living Creatures**

Rand believes that life is the criterion of value for all living creatures; therefore, any action taken to preserve one's life is good and any action leading to one's destruction is unacceptable. Plants are among the simplest living creatures. A plant has been created in such a way that it automatically and involuntarily performs actions to keep itself alive (1964a, 917). Compared to plants, animals have more complex mechanisms for survival.

Rand believes in a hierarchical scheme for consciousness only possessed by man and animals. The lowest level of consciousness is sensation. Sensation is exclusive to creatures that have five senses receiving external stimuli. A sensational response is an involuntary response to external stimuli and is invaluable for the living creature. Perception is a higher level of consciousness. Rand believes that perception takes place when a set of sensed affairs collected by the brain are analyzed. Perception helps the living creature to go beyond the senses and have a general awareness of single separate affairs. This level of consciousness exists in animals as well. The perceptive abilities of animals enable them to have particular skills such as hunting. Perception is similar to sensation in that it is an automatic form of cognition and consciousness (1965, 16). Therefore, although animals are not endowed with the power of will, they always act to survive and are unable to voluntarily destroy their own lives. According to Rand, this means that animals always do the right thing and all their actions are good.

Man is the most complex living creature and possesses the third and highest level of consciousness—that of conceptualization. Conceptualization does not exist in animals. The integration of perceptions into concepts and ideas is what Rand calls association or thinking. This process is not automatic or instinctive. Man can choose to think or not but he cannot escape the consequences of his choice (1961a, 11). Rand believes that man's nature is designed in such a way that he can choose to think and be aware or avoid it, but if he avoids thinking, he has stepped towards his own destruction and committed an immoral action (1985, 12-13). In this way, Rand thinks of rational living as a successful way of life.

Rand believes that one of the most important differences between man and animals is that man has a general understanding of the past, present, and future, while animals can only perceive the present (1961b, 19-21). This is due to the fact that animals do not have any degree of time-consciousness, and lack man's intellect. Animal life is composed of separate cycles that are constantly repeated; they begin new cycles of their lives without even a small relation to the past. On the contrary, man's life is a constant whole, where present, past, and future are all interconnected (1964b, 20).

### 2.3. The Relation between Egoism and Moral Values

In her book, *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics*, Tara Smith describes Rand's ethical egoism and explains why it is egoistic. Based on Rand's egoism, man should act to realize his own desires and interests. In other words, it is every man's moral duty to achieve personal happiness and not sacrifice his own welfare and happiness for those of someone else. Based on this ethical theory, it is only self-preservation which would motivate man to apply moral values and principles in his life (Smith 2006, 23).

Smith mentions an important and remarkable point in Rand's ethical system. She believes that Rand's ethical system does not first present an argument for ethical values and principles and then provide an argument to support egoism. According to Smith, when Rand speaks of two options of life and death for man and considers the selection of one of them as the starting point for moral values and principles, in fact she explains her egoistic ethical system. A man who has chosen his life as having the highest value has implicitly accepted that he cannot put other people's lives before his own and cannot sacrifice his desires for others' desires. Thus, in order to preserve his own life, one must put his happiness at a higher priority than the happiness of others (Smith 24-25). According to Rand, the most important characteristic of an ideal man is that he considers existence to be an independent goal. In other words, an ideal man never uses his existence and desires as a means to achieve other things (Peikoff 1999, 301).

In every egoistic ethical system, the term *selfishness* is perceived in relation to the term *self*. Therefore, one of the most important questions ethical egoism is meant to answer is the meaning of man's self. Rand tries to fuse the meaning of this term with that of man's values and mind. One of her important works covering this issue is the novel *Fountainhead*. Here, Rand introduces the theory of egoism as one that has a pivotal role for man's intellect and values (Bernstein 1984, 14). She also creates a deep relation between fundamental rational moral values and ethical egoism.

### **3. Study and Criticism of Rand's Ethical Egoism**

In this section, the most important weak points of Rand's ethical system will be studied. Many philosophers have criticized Rand's ethical egoism, but only prominent criticisms will be mentioned here.

#### **3.1. Incorrect Image of Self**

The most fundamental criticism of Rand's ethical egoism is her understanding of the concept of *self*. In her ethical system, since the self is superior to others, it is separate from others and separate from society. Thus, others and society do not play a role in the definition of an individual's self. However, an individual's dependence on society is not an epistemological dependence but an instrumental one. If others do not play a role in the definition of self and the self is superior to others, then obviously the role of others in an ethical system will fade or even disappear.

According to Rachels, the most important problem in Rand's ethical egoism is that she defines a false dilemma for us: Man has to either accept that his interests and values are not important and always sacrifice them for others or he has to recognize the importance of his values and desires and be indifferent to the interests and desires of others. Rachels believes that both the individual's desires and values and those of others can be appreciated and balanced (Rachels 1998, 71). Although it is important to pay attention to one's own desires and values, Rachels believes that our self will not be implemented and secured if we merely pay attention to our own goals and ignore those of others.

Aristotle's analysis of self is also inconsistent with Rand's definition. According to Aristotle, man is a social creature and a great portion of his human nature is formed in society. On the other hand, Rand thinks of humans as separate entities, each following their own interests. She believes that society is made up of individuals who are each supposed to follow their own good (Boss 2008, 248-49). In his work, *Nikomakhos*, Aristotle stipulates that man is unable to create his identity and reach happiness alone. He believes that man's self is created through friendship and interaction with others, and that man's personality is perfected through friendship with virtuous people (Aristotle 2004, 176-177). Thus, according to Aristotle, others and their goals and desires are valuable.

To have a better understanding of how the epistemological concept of self depends upon others and society, it is necessary to mention some examples of this dependence. Paying attention to subjects such as individuality, freedom, and self-independence also emphasized in Rand's philosophy, is positive. However, these values are only implemented through society and by participation in social activities. On the other hand, individuals are born in different historical,

cultural, economic, and social conditions which they have no control over and which form an important part of their personal identities (Burkitt 2000, 1).

Another issue that verifies the dependence of epistemology of self on others is the gratification of personal desires. Rand emphasizes that man must try to satisfy his own rational desires and interests. However, satisfaction of the simplest personal desire depends on others and society or at least requires a social ground. For example, a physician who would like a blue shirt cannot produce it independently—a tailor's workshop is required to achieve this goal (Seglow 2004, 56). That is, despite a physician's high social status, he requires others to satisfy his countless needs.

Ethical egoists may claim that our relation with others is a utilitarian interaction where we exchange services with each other. For example, although a physician depends on a baker for bread, the baker is also dependent on the physician for treatment; therefore, it is a give-and-take relationship which does not require value for others. However, much of our society is the product of previous generations with whom it is impossible to have a utilitarian interaction. Of course, previous generations have also benefitted from generations prior to them, but the point is that it is impossible to compensate the efforts of past generations in a utilitarian interaction (Barcalow 2007, 75).

We are indebted to others for a great deal of our being. Culture, science, history, art, and even language are created through interactions with other humans. Even our personal independence is influenced by others; in fact, the concepts of independence and dependence are meaningful only when we enter society and interact with others (Lafollette 2007, 272).

Another issue which verifies the dependence of the self on others is that of social goals – this is something Rand never mentions in her discussions. Along with personal goals, groups of people have collective goals, which are valuable for them regardless of their individual interests. For example, the victory of a sports team, realization of ethnic values, and triumph of a nation in war are collective goals which are important for every individual independent of his personal goals (Graham 2004, 58). A soccer player's personal goal may be to become the top goal-scorer, but to avoid losing the match, he will pass the ball to his teammate who has a better chance of scoring. There are many such situations where people would be willing to sacrifice their personal goals to achieve their collective goals. It is therefore clear that an important part of the self is created by society through interactions with other people.

### **3.2. To Consider Personal Life as the Criterion of Value**

Rand believes that the life of a living creature is the foundation of all moral values and an ethical action is that which leads to survival. Man is supposed to preserve his own life and has no duty to preserve the lives of others. According to Rand, the most important indication that life has been implemented is the achievement of happiness. Although Rand accepts a utilitarian and instrumental approach towards other people, an important part of happiness and personal welfare is realized through interactions with others and considering them to be inherently valuable. Since man's happiness depends on the happiness of others, his life depends on the life of others, and he should work towards preserving their lives (Ryan 2003, 305-8).

Rand believes that the most important tool to preserve man's life is intellect. Man's rationality is portrayed in his ability to conceptualize and contemplate. Rand's interpretation of rationality is subject to discussion and has been questioned by critics. She describes the desire to help others (without utilitarian considerations) and to pay attention to their needs as irrational, but does not provide solid proof for her claim (Ryan 2003, 320-21). She also believes that to consider others without considering one's own self leads to self-destruction. Since the self is built through interaction with others and society, Rand's argument is unfounded.

### **3.3. Internal Paradox of Ethical Egoism**

Based on ethical egoism, the goal of ethics is to achieve happiness. A major part of this happiness is achieved through friendship and interaction with other people. Based on this theory, man must seek happiness in solitude and friendship is only meaningful according to this rule. An important question arises here as to whether ethical egoism is compatible with intimacy and love. An intimate friendship calls at times for man to sacrifice his own interests and goals for the sake of his friend. Giving others a higher priority than the self is an altruistic action, which is in serious contrast to egoist ideas (Pojman 2005, 29). Thus, the paradox of egoism is to become altruist if we need to achieve an egoist goal (have an intimate friendship). Rand believes that in an intimate relationship, man sacrifices for someone else because that person plays a pivotal role in his life. This act of self-sacrifice, however, compromises the foundations of egoism.

There are many other cases where, although ethical egoism increases one's good, it decreases one's good as well. Suppose that two individuals have the same illness and both will perish if they do not receive a special vaccine. There is only a single dose of that vaccine available, and both individuals must try to obtain it. Based on the claims of ethical egoism, everyone is supposed to seek their own good; however, under these circumstances, the goods of these two individuals

are in contrast and it is impossible for both to be achieved (Palmer 1991, 41).

### **3.4. Necessities and Non-Practical Implications of Ethical Egoism**

Rand's ethical system leads to challenges in practice. Her theory has implications which are not compatible with her earlier claims. Two important incompatibilities and their implications will be mentioned here.

#### **3.4.1. Results of Field Studies**

According to Rand, there is a direct connection between ethical egoism and the achievement of happiness. Thus, if seeking one's own desires and ignoring other people's inherent value do not lead to happiness, then Rand's ethical theory is in question.

Rand herself did not conduct any research to find out what makes a man happy (Boss 2008, 263-64). However, in 1984, a sociologist by the name of Ruut Veenhoven conducted an extensive meta-study about different expressions of happiness throughout the world. In this meta-study, the results of 245 studies concerning happiness in thirty-two countries were examined (Veenhoven 1991, 14). The conclusions of this study seem to negate Rand's ethical egoism. Based on Rand's ethical egoism, independent, intellectual, and egoist people are happier than other people. Also in her theory, which is dominant in the West, hard work and production are the two most important factors in achieving happiness (Boss 2008, 264). This is what Veenhoven's studies prove to be wrong. Based on his analysis, there is no significant difference between the happiness of employed people and non-employed people. These studies do not indicate that hard working people are happier. On the contrary, they suggest that people who participate in group activities and are sympathetic, generous, and helpful toward others, are happier compared to other people (Veenhoven 1991, 14). In conclusion, this meta-study indicates that the application of Rand's principles of ethical egoism will not lead to a person's happiness.

#### **3.4.2. Incompatibility with Moral Intuitions**

Another problem faced when practicing ethical egoism is its incompatibility with the most profound and clear moral intuitions. According to ethical egoism, helping other people, if it has no benefit for the helper, is not only inessential but also morally wrong, and therefore it should be avoided. Under these conditions, if you can solve Africa's problems at the push of a button, it is morally wrong to do so if it does not have any benefit for you (Pojman 2000, 562). These principles also apply to future generations. Based on ethical egoism, we have no responsibility toward future generations and there is no

obligation to preserve natural resources for their use. Since future generations do not exist at the time being and are unable to benefit us personally, based on ethical egoism, it is meaningless to pay attention to their needs. These ideas are in contrast with the intuitive responsibility that people feel towards future generations, and towards helping others (Pojman 2009, 94-95). Therefore, Rand's ethical egoism is an imperfect ethical theory which is in contrast with our moral intuitions and cannot be implemented practically.

### **Final Evaluation**

Based on her analysis of the concept of self, Rand stresses the priority of the self over others and proposes ethical egoism to be the correct theory in the field of ethics. Ethical egoism is based on the fact that the self is pivotal and inherently valuable while others are not. In this ethical system, other people are instruments that become valuable only when they benefit the self. Rand's view of the self has many shortcomings and ignores remarkable facts concerning the role of society in developing the self.

Criticizing and refuting Rand's ethical egoism does not necessarily prove ethical altruism. Ethical altruism, in its moderate forms, puts others at the center of ethics. Although the self's goals, values, and needs are taken into consideration, it is finally others' goals and values which are given preference (Martin 2007, 9).

Rand's most fundamental problem is her belief that either absolute egoism or absolute altruism must be chosen. Since the value of both the self and others have been accepted in ethics, it has become clear that an efficient ethical theory is one which allows for balance between the self and others. The ethical theory which emphasizes the centrality of the self and others is known as "ethical ego-altruism."

In ethical ego-altruism, the self's dependence on other people is not an instrumental dependence, but an epistemological one. A major part of one's self-identity is formed in society through interaction with others. Since man is epistemologically dependent on others, ignoring their inherent value is equal to ignoring one's own inherent value. In ethical ego-altruism, both the self and others are inherently valuable, and paying attention to one while ignoring the other is morally wrong. Therefore, ego-altruism promotes a balance between the self and others such that no one is sacrificed for the other.

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