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Tara Smith

Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics:

The Virtuous Egoist.

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This is a strongly written addition to the scholarly literature on Ayn Rand's philosophy. Its first great virtue is that it connects Rand's work to recent literature in ethics. Since the 1990's there has been a surge of interest among professional philosophers in virtue ethics, eudaimonism, naturalism, and objectivity. Rand's contemporary generation in the 1950's and 1960's tended to skepticism and non-naturalism. Brian Medlin was representative, publishing in the same year as Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* the following: 'it is now pretty generally accepted by professional philosophers that ultimate ethical principles must be arbitrary' ('Ultimate Principles and Ethical Egoism'. *Australian Journal of Philosophy* 35 [1957]: 111-118; 111).

Our contemporary generation of philosophers has moved decisively away from that position — here Smith cites the work of Philippa Foot, Julia Annas, Berys Gaut, and Peter Railton, and notes the many positive connections between their and Rand's work of forty years ago.

Chapters 1 and 2 alone are worth the price of Smith's book for their clear and accurate overview of the central theses of Rand's ethics. Rand is a polarizing figure among intellectuals, so this second great virtue of Smith's book should not be under-estimated given the sometimes unrecognizable portraits of Rand's philosophy circulating in popular and academic publications. As Smith writes in her conclusion, 'As long as egoism is portrayed as materialistic, hedonistic, emotion-driven, or predatory, we can readily sympathize with those looking elsewhere for guidance' (285). Smith argues convincingly and refreshingly that Rand's egoism is none of those.

The central chapters of Smith's book are structured around the major virtues in Rand's system: rationality, productiveness, honesty, integrity, independence, justice, and pride. Given the centrality of virtue ethics in the current literature, Smith distinguishes Rand's *action-focused* account of virtue from the *character-focused* accounts of Rosalind Hursthouse, Alisdair MacIntyre, Paul Woodruff, and Christina and Fred Sommers. These chapters contain several gems of insight including: Smith's account of the scope of integrity and the question of whether, for example, Hitler had integrity given that he acted consistently in following his destructive policies (185); a discussion of courage as 'integrity under fire' (192); the connection between productiveness and (non-religious) spiritual values (204); accounts of productiveness and greed (217); discussions of the connections and contrasts between Aristotle's and Rand's accounts of pride (223); a fine-grained discussion of generosity and why it is neither a virtue nor a vice (256-65); and an account of egoistic love and friendship (287).

Three nits are worth picking in Smith's generally excellent work. One involves the transition she makes (23-4) from Rand's meta-ethics to her egoism. Greater stress here on the *individuality* of human life would make the argument stronger. One can accept the naturalness, objectivity, and conditionality of values — and Smith argues those well — without grasping their individuality. Egoism especially brings with it claims about individual responsibility for producing and justice in consuming. In performing their core life activities, humans are not collective beings like bees or ants; human life is individual in both production and consumption. This is especially important in response to those philosophers who do not accept this, who argue a thorough collectivity or who accept individuality with respect to production but urge collectivity with respect to distribution and consumption. Smith is aware of this — she cites in her footnotes philosophers who resist this very step — but at this juncture she moves quickly.

A second issue arises in Smith's overall strong discussion of justice. She nicely articulates Rand's defense of justice against egalitarianism (156), justice's relationships to forgiveness and mercy (164), and the connection between justice and individual rights (170). The issue here involves the scope

of Rand's conception of justice. Smith consistently defines it as 'the application of rationality to the evaluation and treatment of other individuals' (135). The issue is: Why only *others*? Rand does not restrict the scope of justice to the treatment of others but defines it more broadly to be self-inclusive and even fundamentally self-oriented. In her major theoretical essay on ethics, 'The Objectivist Ethics', Rand states that 'one must never seek or grant the unearned and undeserved, neither in matter nor in spirit (which is the virtue of Justice)' (*The Virtue of Selfishness*, 28). This characteristic statement is inclusive of self. (Leonard Peikoff's definition of justice, which Smith quotes [136], is also inclusive.) A parallel case is honesty: According to Rand, honesty is not faking reality, neither to oneself nor to others — not *only* to others. To return to justice: examples of injustice to oneself include those who undercut their own self-esteem, accept un-earned guilt, delusionally inflate their self-worth, or cultivate humility. If justice involves only the evaluation and treatment of others, such cases would have no justice component.

A third issue also involves scope-of-application questions. How does the virtue of honesty apply to dealing with the deceitful? What is the nature of responsibility when one is constrained by threats of force from others? How do moral principles apply in cases of life-or-death emergencies? Here the question in the Objectivist literature is whether Rand intended the scope of moral principles to be universal (with special application to such non-standard cases), or limited to the standard cases (implying that one steps outside the realm of morality when dealing with liars, thugs, or emergency situations). The former interpretation can rely on Rand's statement in 'The Ethics of Emergencies' that one must differentiate rules of conduct in normal and emergency situations but also that '[t]his does not mean a double standard of morality' (*The Virtue of Selfishness*, 54). The latter interpretation can rely on *Atlas Shrugged's* statement that 'Force and mind are opposites; morality ends where a gun begins' (1023). Smith's discussion is informed and careful in defense of the latter, 'Morality is inapplicable,' position (97); but it is not decisive due to the relatively brief space she devotes to this complex set of issues.

Smith's book belongs in every college and university library, and on the shelves of philosophers interested in Rand's views and current trends in the ethics literature.

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