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WHY MORAL JUDGMENTS CAN BE OBJECTIVE*

By Tibor R. Machan

I. The Desirability of Objectivity

Are we able to make objective moral judgments? By "objective" I mean "supportable by reference to facts about the world in contrast to what we may feel, desire, wish, or hope for vis-à-vis those facts."[1] By "moral judgments" I mean, broadly, "judgments pertaining to how human beings ought to conduct themselves, how their institutions should be set up, and so forth."[2]

This perennial philosophical—yet at once popular[3]—topic needs often to be revisited because it is central to human life. Judgments about how people conduct themselves, about the institutions they devise—in short, about whether they are doing what is right or what is wrong—are ubiquitous. Even if one complains that people are judgmental or that they mistakenly think they can make true moral judgments or assessments (when, in fact, that is supposedly unjustified), one is making judgments that one intends to have taken seriously, to be correct, even as one is rejecting the wisdom of doing so. "You shouldn't think moral judgments are objective" is itself a moral judgment, albeit one pertaining to a special undertaking, one of a restricted scope. Those making it seem to treat it as objectively true.[4]

In short, moral skeptics or relativists, too, criticize those who disagree with them, making note of their opponents' supposedly misguided thinking about this metaethical issue. And they expect that they are correct when they do so—objectively right, that is.

Some may hold that such judgments are no more than expressions of what is desirable—that is to say, they express what some desire. But that

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[1] For a fuller explanation of the nature of objectivity, see Tibor R. Machan, *Objectivity: Recovering Determinate Reality in Philosophy, Science, and Everyday Life* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2004).

[2] Moral judgments here also cover political judgments, in other words.

[3] Whether objectivity is possible, for instance, in journalism, self-understanding, or psychotherapy are issues of popular interest and not solely the concern of professional philosophers.

[4] Truth is objective in any case. To add "objectively" to "true" serves to signal that no other kind of truth is possible. There can be subjective feelings or experiences or phenomena, but there can be no subjective truths. As to whether criticisms in philosophy qualify as ethical or moral, it seems to me that they do, as part of professional ethics.

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is not what most people mean when they make such judgments—they take these judgments to be true and, thus, objective. The mere expression of a desire does not amount to a criticism.

Yet such dialectical points are not sufficient to make out the case for the objectivity of moral judgments—that is, to defend the position that it is possible to gain knowledge of (and demonstrate) the truth or falsity of moral judgments as we do with other judgments (for example, those in physics, biology, engineering, or drivers' education). All that these dialectical points make evident is that denying the objectivity of moral and other evaluations leads to self-referential inconsistency; then, perhaps, what follows is only that we ought to remain silent on the topic (as Wittgenstein appears to have believed).[5]

One promising approach in defense of objectivity in ethics is to work out a sound, naturalistic idea of what the human good amounts to and to go on to demonstrate that certain ways of acting advance this good while others thwart it. If one can show that there are such ways of acting, this would satisfy the requirement of objectivity, since whether certain ways of acting advance the good or not is a matter capable of being established, shown to be true based on evidence and argument. In this essay, I plan to deploy a neo-Aristotelian naturalism in order to keep the "is-ought" gap at bay and place morality on an objective footing.[6] I will do this with the aid of the ideas of Ayn Rand—as well as, but only by implication and association, those of Martha Nussbaum and Philippa Foot.

It is important to mention at the outset that in defending the objectivity of moral judgments, one is not defending the universal applicability of all of them, except where identical circumstances obtain. Thus, if in fact Mrs. George ought to send her child to take piano lessons, it does not follow

[5] See Ludwig Wittgenstein, "A Lecture on Ethics," in *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 11–12, and the last sentence of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company; London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922): "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." As Arto Tukiainen says, "Wittgenstein regarded the point of the *Tractatus* as ethical. His purpose was to show that there cannot be any meaningful ethical sentences." So Wittgenstein is supposed to have denied that ethics is objective. See http://examinedlifejournal.com/articles/printerfriendly.php?shorttitle=wittmoralval&authorid=54. But see also Tibor R. Machan, "Heretical Essay in Wittgenstein's Meta-Ethics," *Analysis and Metaphysics* (forthcoming).

[6] Among those who have made this attempt within the naturalist, neo-Aristotelian school are Henry B. Veatch, *For an Ontology of Morals: A Critique of Contemporary Ethical Theory* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1971); John Cooper, *Knowledge, Nature, and the Good: Essays on Ancient Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), as well as several others. Only Ayn Rand identifies herself explicitly as an *Objectivist*.

One of my own early efforts to defend a naturalist-objectivist metaethics appears in Tibor R. Machan, "Epistemology and Moral Knowledge," *Review of Metaphysics* 36, no. 3 (September 1982): 23–49. I try to sketch the appropriate conception of human knowledge in support of this task in Tibor R. Machan, "Education and the Philosophy of Knowledge," *Educational Theory* 20, no. 3 (1970): 253–68.

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that everyone should. It is irrelevant that the truth of such a claim is universally ascertainable; the point is that it doesn't have to apply universally, to all moral agents, although there may be some moral judgments, very basic ones, that are universally applicable in this sense. (I have elsewhere defended this point.)[7]

Nor is objectivity about ethics the same as impartiality or neutrality: that someone ought morally or ethically to advance his or her child's welfare can be the case without whoever knows this having to be indifferent to the matter. "Objective" in this context, then, means—at the minimum—that judgments are supported by facts that are themselves independent of human wishes, hopes, desires, or similar states of mind not concerned with grasping facts.[8] As the philosopher Raimond Gaita has put the point:

> Hardly anyone will deny that it requires disciplines of mind and character to "see things as they are" as opposed to how they appear to be and, especially in the case of psychological phenomena, how for many and subtle reasons we fantasize them to be. Nor are many people likely to deny that we must often distance ourselves from our subject so that our fears, fantasies and affections do not interfere with our sense of what is objectively the case.[9]

Thus, within the limitations of my purpose (to show that objective moral judgments are possible), I will focus primarily on showing that Ayn Rand and similar neo-Aristotelians have made a very promising case for placing ethical or moral judgments on an objective footing.[10] Rand called her philosophy "Objectivism" because she defended the view that there is an independent reality (including ethical or moral reality) that we can come to know objectively, that is, based on evidence and reasoning that yield understanding without distorting what is being understood. The principles of ethics, for an Objectivist, are principles no less objective than, say, the rules of some game or sport. In important respects, these rules are similarly conditional, though not relative—which is to say, they presuppose some facts (e.g., the choice to live) but are not predicated on

[7] Tibor R. Machan, "Why It Appears That Objective Ethical Claims Are Subjective," *Philosophia* 26, nos. 1–4 (1997): 1–23. A recent critique of the is-ought gap is Hilary Putnam's *The Collapse of the Fact-Value Dichotomy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). Putnam's critique, not unlike Martha Nussbaum's and Philippa Foot's efforts, comes several decades after Rand briefly laid out her case for the objectivity of value judgments. (See note 11 below.)

[8] I discuss a wide range of issues related to objectivity in Machan, *Objectivity.*

[9] Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (London: Routledge, 1998), 248.

[10] There is a subtle difference between what Rand means by "objective" when it comes to ethics and what she means by the term in other, more straightforwardly epistemological, contexts. For more on this, see Jason Raibley, "Rand on the Objectivity of Values" (2002), http://www.ios.org/events/advsem02/JRObjectivity.pdf.

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contingencies (such as where one lives, the weather, one's cultural background, etc.). The idea is that it can be objectively shown, for example, that "If one is to live the good human life, one ought to be honest." Furthermore, Rand argued both that objective ethical knowledge is possible and that the "is-ought" gap is bogus.

For Rand, "objective" means "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."[11] That is to say, reality exists independently of us, and for us to apprehend or grasp it correctly, we must do the mental work she describes in her book on epistemology (from which the foregoing quotation is drawn). In relation to morality, however, this reality involves a certain kind of relationship between who and what we are and what it is that enhances living for such a being as we are. So while objective, morality as Rand, and indeed many others, understand it is agent-relative.

II. Objectivism and Objective Ethical Judgments

In her essay "The Objectivist Ethics,"[12] Rand argues against David Hume that moral judgments can be validated or shown to be well founded. She rejects the passage in which Hume denies that one can *deduce* from true statements about what is the case certain true statements about what one ought to do. Rand goes on to develop her case, as we have already gleaned above, that human life is normatively pregnant, as it were, meaning that it is bound up, through and through, with a normative dimension.[13] The concept of value, Rand argues, is tied intimately to the concept of life, so when something is a living organism there is no escaping

[11] Ayn Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* (New York: New American Library, 1970), 54 (emphasis added to indicate the source of objectivity apprehended by human consciousness).

Ayn Rand preceded Martha Nussbaum and Philippa Foot in making a case in recent philosophy for an objectivist, neo-Aristotelian metaethics. Both Nussbaum and Foot published their discussions of these metaethical matters three decades after Rand came out with her discussion of the topic in her essay "The Objectivist Ethics," in her book *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: New American Library, 1961). Incidentally, this title is often misunderstood to indicate that Rand is defending some normative version of Hobbes's psychological egoism. In fact, her ethical egoism is more in line with Aristotle's *eudaimonism,* whereby ethics per se stands in service of living a good human life. Thus the subtitle's reference to "a new concept of egoism."

[12] Ibid.

[13] Accordingly, it would be a mischaracterization of Rand's view to suggest that she proposes to derive moral conclusions from nonmoral facts. The facts from which she proposes to derive moral conclusions do contain normative elements, but they are in no way disqualified as facts for that reason alone. The qualification of these facts as "moral" or "ethical" is, in crucial respects, similar to the qualification of other facts as "biological" or "sociological"; the qualification locates these facts ontologically.

certain normative considerations about such a being. Living beings, for example, do well or badly. "Epistemologically, the concept of 'value' is genetically dependent upon and derived from the antecedent concept of 'life.' To speak of 'value' as apart from 'life' is worse than a contradiction in terms. It is only the concept of 'Life' that makes the concept of 'Value' possible."[14] (This, by the way, is a point also implicit in the works of Martha Nussbaum and Philippa Foot; see *The Therapy of Desire*[15] and *Natural Goodness*,[16] respectively.) Because of the human capacity for choice, however—for freely deciding to do one thing or another or yet another—in the lives of human beings this *normative* component is transformed into an *ethical or moral* one. Thus, not only is it possible to consider whether a human being is doing well or badly, it is also possible to consider whether one is choosing and acting responsibly in doing well or badly.

Rand does not try to establish that one can provide *deductive* arguments for moral judgments. She does argue, however, that moral judgments can be *validated* or *derived* from other judgments that are not explicitly moral (though they would normally be normative or value-laden). These derivations are not deductions but inferences, more akin to inductions or conceptual implications than to formal deductions—for example, "If one acts prudently, generously, honestly, and/or courageously, one will (for the most part) live a successful, good, or happy life."

This is how best to understand what Rand proposes in opposition to Hume, based on her understanding of the nature of concepts and definitions and how they work in propositions and arguments.

We can glean what Rand set out to do if we consider that in the sciences there would also be a gap (call it the "is-must" gap) if we were to expect that scientific reasoning needs to be deductive. But that isn't so. Scientific arguments that rest on research and testing—and lead, optimally, to objective knowledge of scientific facts, laws, or principles—involve inferences whose conclusions are true not beyond a shadow of a doubt but beyond a reasonable doubt. Hume could have no complaint about such reasoning, and as Rand understood moral reasoning, Hume might not have had grounds for complaint about what she set out to defend. It has the following form: "It is good for a human being to thrive, and the choice to be prudent (or courageous, generous, and so forth) is required for thriving, so it is good for one to choose to be prudent."[17] The precise nature of this

[14] Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," 18.

[15] Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[16] Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[17] Thus, Eric Mack is correct when he writes that "[b]eing an objectivist with respect to claims about the effectiveness of means to chosen ends no more removes an advocate of the choice doctrine from the basic subjectivist camp than it removes Hume from that camp" (Mack, "More Problematic Arguments in Randian Ethics," *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 7 [Spring, 2006]: 301). It is not this that removes the choice doctrine from the basic subjectivist camp; rather, it is the nature of the end chosen, namely, the ultimate end of human life. For

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choice is, of course, complicated; it would ordinarily involve the cultivation of the virtues that constitute and help promote one's happiness.[18]

III. Beyond the "Is-Ought" Gap

The famous "is-ought" gap that Hume identified expresses the philosophical claim that a conclusion that contains moral terms such as "ought to" or "ought not to" cannot be *deduced* from premises that lack those moral terms, because a valid deductive argument can only have in its conclusion components that are fully supported by its premises. If the premises fail to give complete support to the conclusion, the conclusion is not valid. Here is how Hume put the point:

> In every system of morality which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it should be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded that this small attention would subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceiv'd by reason. . . .[19]

Hume discredits all rationalist—or deductivist—efforts to prove moral judgments true. He does this by arguing that they beg the question because such a proof would have to have premises that already contain the crucial

Hume, that end appears to be anything one might desire, whereas in reality, Rand claims, it is only *the one ultimate value* that is possible for us: human life. Any other choice would amount, in time, to the annihilation of ends.

[18] The happiness at issue here is not what so many contemporary social scientists take to amount to happiness—cheerfulness, even giddiness. See, for example, Jean-Paul Pecqueur, *The Case Against Happiness* (Farmington, ME: Alice James Books, 2006). On my own view, happiness is the self-awareness of living successfully.

[19] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1961), 423.

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term, "ought" or "ought not," thus simply pushing the problem back a step in each case, leaving the moral judgment ultimately unprovable.[20]

In response to Hume's passage, Rand says:

> In answer to those philosophers who claim that no relation can be established between ultimate ends or values and the facts of reality, let me stress that the fact that living entities exist and function necessitates the existence of values and of an ultimate value which for any given living entity is its own life. Thus the validation of value judgments is to be achieved by reference to the facts of reality. The fact that a living entity *is*, determines what it *ought* to do. So much for the issue of the relation between *"is"* and *"ought."*[21]

She writes that the passage from Hume "purports to mean that *ethical* propositions cannot be derived from *factual* propositions—or that knowledge of that which *is* cannot logically give man any knowledge of what he *ought* to do. And wider: it means that knowledge of reality is irrelevant to the actions of a living entity and that any relation between the two is 'inconceivable.' "[22]

However, what Hume actually appears to have contended is not what Rand claims he did, namely, that "knowledge of reality is irrelevant to the actions of a living entity and that any relation between the two is 'inconceivable'," or that "ethical propositions cannot be derived from factual propositions." Rather, what Hume argued is that it is impossible to *deduce*

[20] For a recent effort to address Hume's concerns, see Mark H. Bickhard, "Process and Emergence: Normative Function and Representation," *Axiomathes* 14, nos. 1–3 (2003): 121–55. Bickhard also reads Hume as saying that one cannot derive "ought" from "is," whereas Hume said that one cannot deduce "ought" from "is."

[21] Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," 19 (emphasis in the original). Did Rand claim to have derived an "ought" from an "is" in this essay, as Mack states ("More Problematic Arguments," 297)? Let me reiterate that Rand is using the term "validation" in her discussion of value judgments. This idea of "validation" is not the same as the Humean idea of deduction; nor, it seems, is it the same as Mack's idea of derivation. What Rand seems to me to be doing is arguing (in some legitimate fashion or other) that moral judgments can (objectively) be shown to be true. She does not develop in detail just what such validation consists of. I surmise, from the full context of her approach to demonstrating the truth of her ideas, that hers is a type of conceptual rather than syllogistic "proof."

At the risk of sounding heretical, Rand's form of validation smacks of the kind of reasoning we find in Wittgenstein or in criminal prosecution, akin to the argument to the best explanation. So her showing that moral claims can be objective rests on a different idea of what it takes to validate such claims from what Hume appears to have regarded as required for such a task (and then denied is possible). See Tibor R. Machan, *Ayn Rand* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 57ff.

It is also necessary to note here that when Rand and others in this tradition of naturalistic metaethics and ethics defend a principle, they do this "for the most part" and not "necessarily in every conceivable case."

[22] *Journals of Ayn Rand*, ed. David Harriman (New York: Dutton, 1997), 683 (emphasis in the original).

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what one ought and ought not do from what is or is not the case. The difference is not at all negligible.

IV. Not All Reasoning Is Deductive

A deduction is deemed by many philosophers to be a formal logical operation, capable of involving only concepts with closed, final definitions. On this view, deductions are treated as timeless proofs. This is a tradition of thinking about knowledge along lines suggested by Plato, with his theory of forms or the natures of things, and continued, especially, by Descartes. Both of these very influential philosophers appeared to suggest that for us to have knowledge of anything, this knowledge must be capable of being stated as a *necessary* truth. That, in turn, suggests that whenever reasoning is performed invoking facts that human beings know, this reasoning must amount to a species of logical deduction comparable to that which occurs in formal logical (indeed, symbolic) operations. In such reasoning, the operative terms and propositions are symbolic of closed, final definitions and propositions comprised of terms with such definitions. Such reasoning is, in consequence, timelessly valid, and whatever truth might be achieved by means of it would also amount to timeless, necessary truth.

However, when logic is deployed to produce proofs involving facts that may imply other facts, this is not a formal (let alone symbolic) deduction but another type of proof—another way to *derive* a factual proposition from other factual propositions.[23] David Hume did not discuss the difference between this type of derivation and formal deduction, and as I argue in my book *Ayn Rand*,[24] Rand's Objectivist epistemology holds out a credible promise for the success of such a derivation but does not establish that the strict formal deduction Hume thinks is inconceivable is actually available in establishing or proving the truth of any moral propositions.[25]

[23] Ken Lucey has objected with the rhetorical question, "Does Machan think a fact is such that it can have implications?" Yes. For example, the fact that there is an ashtray on a table in a restaurant implies that smoking is permitted there. Or the fact of someone's racism implies the appropriateness of moral contempt for that someone.

[24] Machan, *Ayn Rand,* chap. 2.

[25] Rand can be interpreted as holding that the kind of strictly formal deductions that others think exclusively deserve the term are simply very broad, *symbolic models* of logical reasoning. So she would argue that deductions do, in fact, obtain between judgments of facts involving concepts that are themselves contextually (as distinct from timelessly) defined, possessing essential attributes that make logical deductions possible. Her objection to Hume, then, is that Hume failed to see that concepts such as "ought to" and "ought not to" can be derived from definitions of "human goodness" as, in part, essentially involving choices and ultimate values. In other words, Rand would argue that a sound, valid theory of human goodness deductively yields moral conclusions, conclusions regarding what one ought to do, so long as by "deduction" one does not mean logical arguments involving closed definitions of concepts. For more, see Machan, *Ayn Rand,* and Machan, *Objectivity.*

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V. Conceptualization Versus Deduction

The idea of concept formation clarifies why Rand does not accept either Hume's or G. E. Moore's idea of what it is to know something and how to define a concept.[26] Put plainly, what is at issue here is the claim that the way we acquire knowledge is by developing and organizing our ideas based on awareness we have of the world for the time being, by means of our perceptual organs, guided by axiomatic concepts (which I have discussed elsewhere and which are central to Rand's Objectivism).[27] In a bit more detail, the process goes on roughly as follows.

One detects various similarities and differences by means of the sensory organs; one recognizes that nothing like that is usually, normally possible unless something exists that is being perceived, and then one carefully, parsimoniously, arranges a system of ideas in which principles of logic are followed, all the while keeping in continued focus the initial differences and similarities, thus learning what it is that exists. The result is a system of sound—well-grounded—ideas that best (but not necessarily finally) capture for us aspects of reality that we set out to understand.[28]

When we know reality, moreover, we do not know it by grasping it forever. We know it at a given time, not for all times. One reason it isn't easy to give an account of knowing reality is that knowing isn't like other accomplishments with which we are familiar. The way human beings know is unique in the world; they know conceptually, not perceptually as most other living beings do, and they have the capacity to reflect on their conceptual knowledge—to become self-aware—a process that needs to be identified and understood without the benefit of easy analogies. But some analogies come closer than others. For example, we know somewhat analogously to how we grasp—or grab—something as well as we can, but not without the possibility of improvement, and we can observe our grasping—or grabbing—as well. All efforts to understand the nature of human knowledge must admit that there is nothing quite like it in the rest of nature and that the best we can do is depend on our ordinary, nonsystematic familiarity with cases of knowing, something that runs the risk

[26] I examine both Hume's and Moore's criticism of "naturalism" in Tibor R. Machan, *Human Rights and Human Liberties* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1975), and Machan, *Individuals and Their Rights* (Chicago: Open Court, 1989). For both Hume and Moore, definitions appear to amount to necessary truths, whereas in the neo-Aristotelian, Randian epistemological tradition they are understood to be contextual and open-ended. See Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology.*

[27] Machan, *Ayn Rand,* chap. 2, and Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology.*

[28] By "in which the principles of logic are followed" I am referring to the policy of being consistent, avoiding contradictions, and avoiding all the more specialized fallacies involved in bad reasoning. I do not, however, have in mind adhering to the strict requirements of formal or symbolic logic, wherein one aims for purely deductive reasoning. For example, substantive reasoning (including moral reasoning) need not result in conclusions that are *logically impossible* to deny. For more on this, see Tibor R. Machan, "Another Look at Logical Possibility," *The Personalist* 51, (1970): 246–49. See also Douglas B. Rasmussen, "Logical Possibility: An Aristotelian Essentialist Critique," *The Thomist* 47 (October 1983): 513–40.

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of begging the question. In a certain respect, an attempt to give an account of human knowing involves starting out on an entirely new endeavor.[29]

In any case, when we draw conclusions in everyday life (about whether to open a door when trying to go through it, or about how to build a bridge or a helicopter, or how to construct an argument for objective

[29] A fatal flaw of much of philosophical reflection about what it is to know has been (from Plato through Descartes to our own time) that knowledge has often been understood to require timeless certainty. If one knows, it must be impossible to even conceive that one is wrong. Knowledge must be absolute, perfect, incorrigible, finished, and, as it is sometimes put, in *the final analysis*. For a discussion of a different view of knowledge, see Adam Leite, "Is Fallibility an Epistemological Shortcoming?" *The Philosophical Quarterly* 54, no. 215 (April 2004): 232–51.

The Platonist view (not necessarily Plato's view) of what knowledge must be is an impossible ideal. This comes across when, for example, Socrates notes that he knows only that he knows nothing. Socrates is arguably invoking the idealist view of perfect knowledge of Forms and disclaiming having achieved it. Given the prevalence of the Platonist view of knowledge, the result has been a great variety of more or less skeptical ideas about knowledge, such as the prominent view that we cannot really know anything, or if we can, perhaps, it's just an approximation; maybe we can have probable or approximate or fallible knowledge. In contrast, I would say that sometimes we probably know this or that; sometimes we have approximate knowledge; sometimes our knowledge is fallible. At other times, however, we simply know, without qualification. It is only the model of ideal (Platonic) knowledge that inclines one to place the qualifiers before "knowledge" in every instance.

Currently, Richard Rorty's communitarian view of knowledge is widely respected, according to which one knows in terms of one's group and objectivity is not possible but solidarity is. For the full story, see Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). All this has been especially influential with regard to knowledge about right and wrong, good and evil, producing some disturbing practical results in crucial areas such as the way personal misconduct, professional malpractice, crime, and terrorism are widely understood and discussed. For more on this, see Tibor R. Machan, "Terrorism and Objective Moral Principles," *International Journal of World Peace* 4, no. 4 (October–December 1987): 31–40. (The ideas of this paper are incorporated in Machan, *Objectivity*.)

What Rand has proposed is that human beings, if they do the hard work, can obtain knowledge just fine and dandy. There is, of course, ample evidence of this throughout the sciences, in technology, and, let's not forget it, in ordinary life. But what is this human knowledge? As the name of her system makes evident, the key to knowledge is objective validity (meaning that knowledge must be "reasonable or justifiable in the circumstances"). As she put the point in her *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology,* 46:

> Objective validity is determined by reference to the facts of reality. But it is man who has to identify the facts; objectivity requires discovery by man—and cannot precede man's knowledge, i.e., cannot require omniscience. Man *cannot* know more than he has discovered—and he *may not* know less than the evidence indicates, if his concepts and definitions are to be objectively valid.

Ayn Rand's position is, I believe, the one that Gilbert Harman expressed well: namely, that we must "take care not to adopt a very skeptical attitude nor become too lenient about what is to count as knowledge" (Gilbert Harman, *Thought* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976], 145). Another prominent contemporary philosopher who has advanced this understanding of human knowledge is J. L. Austin, in his essay "Other Minds," in Austin, *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961). Arguably, in his *On Certainty* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969), Ludwig Wittgenstein also suggests such a view of knowledge.

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ethics), the conclusions are not strictly speaking deduced—as formal logicians would characterize deductions—but are conceptually inferred from successive facts that are known contextually. Moreover, the state of our knowledge is subject to change. We may learn that what we knew once (e.g., regarding history or biology) is now understood somewhat differently. Given this, it is also possible to imagine that in the future, the state of knowledge will change once again. That is to say, the premises of substantive (including moral) arguments are not finally certain in the way that those of formal, logical arguments are; nonetheless, these premises, and the conclusions they support, can be objective and contextually certain.[30]

The reason this is different from pure logical deduction is that such deductions are formal and symbolic, and thus not dependent on actual concepts, but only on symbols of concepts. As such, strictly logical deductions are timeless. Let us look first at a simple syllogism from term logic, and then at one from propositional logic. We will see why they can mislead us about the nature of logical argumentation about substantive matters. First:

All *A*s are *B*s.
All *B*s are *C*s.
So, all *A*s are *C*s.

This argument does not pose the problem that *A* is open-ended, not finally identified—or, to put it slightly differently, that the concept of *A* (unlike the concept "human being" or "apple" or "lion") isn't finally closed. That is because *A* is not a concept but a formal symbol. Now let's consider an argument from propositional logic:

Given that *P* implies *Q*,
and that *Q* implies *R;*
therefore, if *P* then *R*.

As I have noted, *A* (or *B* or *C*) is not a concept but a symbol for one. The point to take to heart is that the way symbols behave in formal arguments must not be confused with how concepts would behave. Nor are *P, Q,* and *R* propositions—they simply stand in for them. But to appreciate the nature of substantive reasoning, it is necessary to explore the nature of propositions and concepts, not only their symbolic representations in formal logic texts.

[30] Thus, if one reasons, "I just left and locked my car in the faculty parking lot, and it is reasonable to hold that no one has moved it, so that is where my car is now, so that is where I will find it upon my return," this is not quite the same sort of formal reasoning as "Since *p* strictly implies *q*, and *q* strictly implies *r*, and since *p*, therefore *r*."

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Compare the formal symbolic syllogism with the following: "All human beings are biological entities; all biological entities are mortal; so all human beings are mortal." The concepts here are not finally locked in, so it is intelligible to propose that the conclusion does not follow since the second premise might be false. The mortality of animals is not a logical truth, as one might put it in terms of contemporary analytic philosophy. But so what?

Indeed, science fiction writers create plausible enough stories by often denying various parts of such syllogisms. The conclusions are, thus, formally valid only if the statement of what is an animal or biological entity is treated as closed or finally true, the last word on the subject. But then some will object that definitions merely stipulate and do not confirm reality's unchangeable nature.

Purely formal deductive arguments do not have these problems. This is why most reasoning does not involve deductive inferences but conceptual (logical) ones, in which a very significant role is played by theories and definitions. Rand made this a central part of her epistemology.

In any case, Hume's view about our inability to deductively prove ethical claims has had an enormous impact on the social sciences and on moral philosophy. Nonetheless, Hume himself did not appear to have embraced the full-blown ethical and political skepticism to which his argument is thought to have given rise. Hume, after all, argued forcefully in support of many normative claims. What he did not do, however, is lay out a cogent explanation for how such support could be provided apart from deductive inferences. I would argue that this was due to Hume's (as well as many other philosophers') embrace of the idea that unless something is necessarily true, it cannot count as bona fide, certain human knowledge, knowledge that can be defended against skepticism.

Thus, by affirming what to many appeared an unbridgeable gap between factual and value judgments, Hume's anti-rationalism laid the foundation for positivism. This is the view that while what are called empirical facts are something we can know about, values are not within the province of the knowable.

This may be said to be a major reason why social scientists have mostly kept away from making value judgments. With respect to such judgments, social scientists invoke the "is-ought" gap, saying, in essence, that talking about values would be unscientific, since values are not subject to factual confirmation. Since the hard sciences had always been closely associated with the idea that factual judgments can be confirmed, the social sciences, in order to carry "the mantle of science," were fashioned to mimic them. The method by which the evidence and reasoning of the hard sciences was supposed to proceed—data gathering and unbiased analysis—needed to be followed in the social sciences, and this appeared to preclude dealing with values, including morality and politics.

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Rand, like many other philosophers, gave no sign of taking into account the distinction between Hume's claim that we cannot *deduce* moral conclusions from factual premises and the possibility of this leaving it open that we could derive or infer them from factual premises in some other way. Rand took the former claim to be affirming the impossibility of rational moral judgments, thus showing a tendency toward rationalism, even though in her epistemological works she disavowed it.

VI. Morality Rightly Understood

Along with Martha Nussbaum, Philippa Foot, Henry Veatch, John Cooper, and others, Ayn Rand was a naturalist; all of these theorists, in fact, developed what can be regarded as Aristotle's biocentric metaethics (as well as ethics). Such an approach resembles the foundations of medicine: the biocentric approach develops a conception of what can be construed as broad healthfulness and rests on it a set of guidelines for "healthy," flourishing living (which, of course, extends beyond the narrowly biological aspect of a person to the entire, robust living human being involved). Once such an understanding is achieved, various practices are identified as promoting a generally healthful life for the kind of living entities at issue, namely, human beings. These practices then are identified as moral virtues, guiding the acting agent toward living and achieving a good human life where that is a matter of choice, akin to how medicine teaches us how to lead healthful lives.[31]

This approach is, of course, applicable to all living things, so far as what is of value to them is concerned, but with human beings the fact that they conduct themselves by *choosing* to do so (to embark on their human lives) introduces the ethical or moral element (i.e., the self-responsible, self-directed element).[32] Morality amounts, then, to the principles of the self-directed fulfillment of the purpose of human flourishing.

Let me now turn to the issue of what would be the most general understanding of the good life for human beings. To get a clue on how this would best be answered, let us consider how a general understanding of the goodness, excellence, or well-being of any living thing would have to be understood.

[31] Can flourishing and justice conflict? I would say they can, in very exceptional cases—when, as John Locke is supposed to have said, "politics is impossible." See H. L. A. Hart, "Are There Any Natural Rights?" *Philosophical Review* 64 (1955): 175–91. Flourishing for human beings comes about through the practice of the virtues, including justice.

[32] The precise way one makes this choice is a complicated matter because it happens incrementally in one's life, starting with tiny decisions reaffirmed over and over again, as well as neglected now and then (and, by some, even frequently). For more on this, see Tibor R. Machan, *Human Rights and Human Liberties* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishing Co., 1975), 94ff. See also Tibor R. Machan, "Rand and Choice," in *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2006), 257–73.

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A good (or healthy) life of a gazelle or worm, generally considered—as, say, from the viewpoint of someone who studies such living things and has occasion to identify specimens that are good versus mediocre or bad ones—involves knowing the kind of being at issue.[33] To be able to identify the specimens that are doing well, one needs to know what kind of living thing is being evaluated. The condition of such a living being cannot be assessed without knowing (even if only roughly) what is its nature, what are the characteristic attributes that could be in better or worse shape for the life of such an entity. Birds that get on with their lives by flying long distances, to use a simple example, require healthy wings, and if they lack them, they would not be good specimens of such birds.

To assess how well a human being is doing in terms of its physical or medical condition, one would have to be well informed about the central physical constituents—organs, faculties, anatomical and physiological features—of such a being and how well they are doing and are likely to do in the future. That is how a good (versus mediocre or poor) specimen would be identified. This is what is meant by calling this a *naturalist* approach—taking as one's starting-point knowledge of the nature of the thing being assessed or evaluated.[34]

When it comes to broader or more robust attributes than those bearing only on the physical or medical condition of a living entity, it is even more necessary to a have a clear grasp of what kind of being we have in mind to evaluate. Given the complexity of human beings, a clear grasp of human nature, the kind of biological entities humans are, is required in order to assess how well they are doing at living a human life.[35]

VII. Human Nature and the Objective Human Good

The history of thought is, of course, replete with attempts to identify human nature—that is, to learn what a human being is *as such.* The attempt has been made difficult because what has been deemed to count as a success in this undertaking has been influenced largely by the Platonist notion of what the nature of something is, and by the Cartesian notion of what it is to know something. Both notions offer up impossible ideals, and both, therefore, encourage skepticism.[36]

Definitions, which purport to state the nature of something, can nonetheless be understood along lines that Rand and others suggest, namely,

[33] Such an examination may take place in a survey of such animals or other living things after some natural calamity, such as a severe drought or flood.

[34] I consider in some detail the oft-discussed problems with such naturalism—with the idea of an objective "nature"—in Machan, *Individuals and Their Rights*, chap. 1.

[35] In some cases, seriously impaired persons can excel in certain very significant respects (e.g., astrophysicist Stephen Hawking), though no one could reasonably deny their being impaired.

[36] For more, see Machan, *Objectivity,* chap. 1.

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contextually.[37] The idea is that a definition of something has just the degree of rigor or exactitude that it is reasonable to expect within the ontological region in which the kind of thing defined is located. To be sure, some things may be given highly formal definitions along lines required in geometry or some other formal systems such as mathematics. Yet when it comes to human beings, which are biological entities, the definition is open-ended and can admit of some borderline grayness; for example, such a definition need not fully fit a damaged specimen or an infant.[38] We might say that the definition picks out the normal cases without barring extraordinary ones.[39]

Although it is accurate enough (within this conception of what a definition must be) to state that human beings are best understood as the sort of beings that are rational animals, there is no need for it to be true that every member of the species is at all times fully capable of rationality (e.g., while asleep, as an infant, or as a member in extreme old age afflicted with senility). All these instances can be accounted for as belonging within the kind in question without needing to fulfill the criteria of membership as a square would fulfill its definition in geometry. (Recall here J. L. Austin's discussion of goldfinches, where he shows that what counts as knowing what a goldfinch is does not include predicting what it will always be!)[40]

To put it another way, experience tells us that rationality is typically a vital part of the life of human beings. While some appear to do without exercising much rationality, they are typically parasitic on others who exercise it routinely. This neo-Aristotelian conception of definitions, developed by Rand and approximated by some others, is as good as it gets in what we require to think reasonably about human affairs,[41] and can serve as the standard for moral evaluation of human actions and institutions.

VIII. Objective Ethics and Rational Individuals

For our purposes, special heed must be paid to the fact that human nature implies the individuality of each human being. A rational or thinking animal engages its rational capacity by choice, volitionally, as a matter of its free will. The point is evident on the basis of several considerations—the explanatory force of the idea, introspection, scientific analysis,

[37] Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology,* chap. 5.

[38] For more on this, see Tibor R. Machan, *Putting Humans First: Why We Are Nature's Favorite* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004). See also Austin, "Other Minds."

[39] This is not the place to develop a full case for the contextualist position. The position faces many challenges, especially with respect to how a contextual definition tracks the ontological features of what is being defined, the *nature* of the thing.

[40] Austin, "Other Minds."

[41] For more along these lines, see Hilary Putnam, *Words and Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), esp. Part I, "The Return of Aristotle." See also Douglas B. Rasmussen, "Human Flourishing and the Appeal to Human Nature," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16, no. 1 (1999): 1–43. I too have addressed the issue in Machan, *Individuals and Their Rights,* 68–83.

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etc.[42] Not only is each human being an essentially unique (and, in a fundamental respect, irreplaceable) individual, but once a human being has activated (or has failed to activate) his or her rational capacity, results will emerge that extend the individuation process even further, in various creative, productive, destructive, or obstructive ways.[43]

The reason this is vital to our concern here has to do with what is implied by the central place of individuality in human nature. The central place of individuality implies that although ethics can be objective, it is rarely universal: different human individuals ought (and ought not) to do different things, ought to conduct themselves differently. While no contradictory moral judgments can be part of ethics or morality, there are enormous differences in how people should act. (We can draw an analogy here to the field of medicine, where there are some general principles of healthful conduct, but where particular judgments about cures, dosages, etc., will vary enormously.)

Along these lines—very much in the spirit of Aristotle's metaethical approach, but with some variations from the specific understanding he proposed—while certain moral virtues are indeed to be practiced by everyone so as to live a morally good human life, there will be different ways of exercising these virtues. Some persons will need to practice certain (but not all) virtues quite vigilantly, while other persons will need to practice different ones more vigilantly (e.g., soldiers may need to be more courageous than, say, accountants, while accountants may need to be more prudent than soldiers).

In all cases where we are concerned with what is the right thing to do, the answer can be ascertained objectively, based on facts and reasoning, but facts pertaining to who one is will matter alongside facts pertaining to what one is—indeed, considerations of the latter will place limits on those of the former. What career one ought to choose, what political party one should support, what kind of diet one should follow, and myriad other questions can be answered in this way, well supported by relevant facts and principles.[44]

[42] For more on this, see Edward Pols, *The Acts of Our Being* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983); Roger W. Sperry, *Science and Moral Priority* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); and Tibor R. Machan, *Initiative—Human Agency and Society* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2000).

[43] For more, see Tibor R. Machan, *Classical Individualism: The Supreme Importance of Each Human Being* (London: Routledge, 1998). An Al Capone or an Adolf Hitler becomes individuated in destructive or obstructive ways.

[44] Arguably, many so-called "self-help" books are, in fact, books of ethics, but they have not been treated as such under the influence of the prominent conception of moral philosophy according to which morality pertains only to interpersonal conduct. For a good critique of this position, see W. D. Falk, "Morality, Self, and Others," in *Morality and the Language of Conduct,* ed. Hector-Neri Castaneda and George Nakhnikian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965). Proper consideration of how one ought to act as the individual one is will be constrained by general principles based upon one's membership in the human species: e.g., rationality, respect for human rights, etc.

Much else could be said about all of this, but I want now to turn to a particular issue that arises in connection with Rand's idea of the objectivity of morality or ethics.[45] She ties this objectivity to a choice a human being makes to live his or her life, and this has provoked some to suggest that she has, in fact, given away the ballgame and caved in to subjectivism.[46]

IX. Randian Objectivity Rests on Choice

Eric Mack and Douglas B. Rasmussen have both argued that since Rand rests the moral principles she believes should guide us on a prior choice to live, her substantive ethics—the set of virtues she considers binding on human beings—is conditional, not categorical, and thus subjective rather than objective. Since I share the Randian idea that without a prior choice there is no grounding for ethics, and since I also believe that her ethics has objective foundations, it will be important to spend some time discussing these criticisms.[47]

If, as I believe, Rand is right that we have free will, so that there is a choice that we can (continually) make to live and to think,[48] then prior to

[45] Some have objected that Rand does not manage to derive ought claims from true claims about what is the case. See, for example, David Friedman, "Some Problems with Ayn Rand's Derivation of Ought from Is," posted on the newsgroup humanities.philosophy.objectivism (reportedly circa November 1996). The criticism rests on a formalist or Platonist conception of definitions and concepts. (See also Robert Nozick, "On the Randian Argument," *The Personalist* 52 [Spring 1971].) As such, it misunderstands Rand and her neo-Aristotelian naturalist metaethics and the conception of definitions she adopts. (See also Putnam, *Words and Life*.)

Actually, Friedman focuses not on ethics per se but on politics, complaining (as does Mack) that Rand cannot show, based on her ethical egoism, that one ought to respect another's right to life, liberty, property, etc. For a very good discussion of why Rand's ethical egoism is often misunderstood along similar lines, see Robert White, "A Study of the Ethical Foundations of Ayn Rand's Theory of Individual Rights" (Auckland, New Zealand: University of Auckland, a thesis submitted 2005). White shows, among other things, that Rand's egoism is peculiar in that it sees ethics *as such* as egoistic or eudaimonist.

[46] Eric Mack, "Problematic Arguments in Randian Ethics," *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 5, no. 1 (Fall 2003); and Douglas B. Rasmussen, "Rand on Obligation and Value," *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2002).

[47] Douglas Rasmussen makes the following challenging point about this issue: "Rand's derivation of an 'ought' from an 'is' seems of limited value: if I choose to live, then I ought to do such and such, but since there can be no obligation without this choice, there is nothing, either logically or morally, that obligates me to choose to live and thus no reason to be moral. Possibly, there was something to Hazel E. Barnes (1967) including a chapter on 'Objectivist Ethics' in her book, *An Existentialist Ethics.* Morality seems to be based on an irrational or *a*rational commitment—the very thing Rand vehemently rejects" (Rasmussen, "Rand on Obligation and Value," 75). The claim, however, that this makes Rand's view "of limited value" assumes that "objective" must mean exactly what Rand denies it must mean, namely, "intrinsic"—that is, that for a moral standard to be objectively true, it would have to amount to a set of categorical imperatives and could not amount to a set of conditional imperatives. For more, see Machan, "Rand and Choice."

[48] Or, to put it as I would, it is possible for us (that is, for each normal human individual) to keep up the initiative to live and to think. Let me stress that the choice to live is a fundamental or first choice, or is best so conceptualized. It may be envisioned as being made, in the initial stages of one's life, haltingly, implicitly, gradually, over and over again,

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such a choice we are at most surviving physically (fully dependent on others) with a mind that is at most dormant, as yet unfocused, and thus not ready to be aware of any alternatives among which an individual might select one and reject the others. And if no commitment has yet been made to keep focusing one's mind and thus keep identifying what the right course of conduct amounts to, there cannot be any responsibility. Ignorance may not be an excuse in the law, but total lack of engagement in reality is an excuse in morality.

I should like to suggest that the parable of the Garden of Eden might illuminate what is at issue here: Prior to eating from the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve had the potential to be fully human. But only after embarking upon gaining knowledge by eating the apple from the tree did this potential become realized and lead to having the personal responsibility to choose right from wrong. The rest of the animals, however, remained in a state of innocence, as it were, because gaining knowledge remained out of their reach. Arguably, every human being replays this development from being an amoral infant/animal to a developing human/moral agent.

David Kelley has provided some promising analysis here, spelling out the foregoing point in less metaphorical terms:

> For humans, the choice to live plays the same role that hard-wired instinct plays for lower animals. Our own choice is the source of our commitment to life; it is what gives us a lock on life as a goal. If the commitment is not there, if I do not actually value my life, then my life cannot be a value for me. It is not something I act to gain or keep.
>
> Of course I am still subject to the facts of reality, [which include the fact] that life is the *only* thing capable of serving as an ultimate value. If I try to make something else my highest value—say golf, or choc-

expressing (as one might put it) the will to live, to be the human being one can become. The choice—or initial emergence of conceptual consciousness—I am considering is a logical first step in action and thus cannot be motivated by some desire or knowledge. It is not a choice in the sense of a selection process, going into force with prior information at hand; rather, it is *the exertion of an initial effort* by a rational agent who at that stage of its development lacks other decisive prompters to action. This initiative is, as it were, the act of free will. (For more on this perennial topic, see Machan, *Initiative—Human Agency and Society*.) As one commentator has noted, what I am defending is a view of morality that is reminiscent of its characterization as "a system of hypothetical imperatives." Only in this case, as the comment goes, "the hypothetical can only really go one way. We might think of the decision to live as one that is inconceivable to reject. . . ." Only the decision is unlike others, since it is not considered but *commences* or *initiates* any and all considerations. I should note, also, that although the choice to live commits one to flourishing, it does not necessitate it. One can start off with the choice to live but then default on what it implies, namely, to think and act virtuously. But a consistent alternative to choosing to live with this implicit commitment to aiming to flourish still would amount to implicitly choosing to wither away. Indeed, if one chooses to live—to survive as a human being—instead of to perish, the implicit choice does involve attempting to flourish. For human beings, the choice to live is not merely the choice to survive—as one survives a plane crash by merely not dying in it—but the choice to live as human beings can.

> olate eclairs, or service to the proletarian revolution—just because they give me the most pleasure or inner satisfaction, then I am acting on subjective whim, in denial of the facts of reality. It would be OK on Hume's or Sartre's theory, because they are indeed subjectivists. Objectivism does not permit this sort of arbitrary and unconstrained choice. But neither does it commit the opposite fallacy of intrinsicism by ignoring the fact and the role of human choice. If I do not choose to live, if it is a matter of indifference to me whether I live or die, then from a moral standpoint there is nothing more to be said.[49]

The precise account of the prior state of mind—prior to the time when, gradually or by leaps and bounds, the individual commences the thinking he is equipped to do and needs to do—is complicated by the fact that it is yet impossible to administer a test for it. At that stage of human development, there is no self-consciousness by which what is going on in the minds of infant human beings could be brought to light.[50] Indeed, because it is hypothesized that in such a state the crucial process of conceptual thinking has not yet commenced, and because it would have to be such conceptual thinking that brings to light the introspective data that would enable us to observe or take note of what goes on prior to the choice to live and to think, the only way to grasp what goes on prior to that choice is by a kind of rational reconstruction. This would involve a consideration of *what must have preceded that choice*, given what we know of those who have indeed developed, grown up, and made progress in their human living and carried on accordingly.

Might it be the case, however, that the infant who fails to make the choice to live and to think is in fact doing something that amounts to "lazy thinking"? Might it not, after all, be a moral failure not to take up the task of gradually but relentlessly becoming aware? Yet, prior to when one makes the choice to think, no alternatives as to what one might do

[49] David Kelley, "Choosing Life" (unpublished paper, 2005).

[50] Neuroscientists, of course, have made observations of the brain's behavior in infancy that correlate with what (in later life) turn out to be mental activities, thus suggesting that such activities do take place in infancy and perhaps even before. Bernard Baars, author of *In the Theater of Consciousness* (London: Oxford University Press, 1996), made some interesting observations to me via e-mail on this topic: "My friend Stan Franklin, who is a mathematician/computer scientist, talks about 'autonomous agents.' Humans are nothing if not autonomous agents—not in a mystical sense, but in a very specific and causal sense. One of the ways we are autonomous is in terms of substitutability of resources. On the level of food, we like to eat meat, but if that runs out, potatoes will do. So there are options. In terms of human relationships, we'd like to have Julia Roberts as our playmate, but there are other fish in that sea. In terms of making a living, we'd all like to be paid for our books, but . . . (etc.). I think that's one of the keys to autonomy, substitutability of resources. Another is flexibility in acquiring knowledge. Humans are by far the best learners in the animal kingdom, obviously. But acquired knowledge also shapes who we are and how we define our purposes and interests. Gerald Edelman . . . makes a big thing about the distinctiveness of the INDIVIDUAL human brain. His Neural Darwinism gives a conceptual account of individuality from solid biological evidence."

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could have come into focus, and the process of selection could not yet have commenced. But after the choice (or, as I prefer to put it, taking the initiative) to think has occurred, even if in an incremental, small-step-by-small-step fashion, then to choose to reject the alternative to remain in focus and continue to think can be seen to involve an evasion of something accessible and of enormous value—a case of self-betrayal, in light of the original choice to live.[51]

It is worth noting that the political philosopher Leo Strauss, someone very different from Rand but also, arguably, within the same philosophical tradition, suggests a similar way of understanding the birth (emergence) of morality. For Strauss, the good life for man is

> simply the life in which the requirements of man's natural inclinations are fulfilled in the proper order to the highest possible degree, the life of a man who is awake to the highest possible degree, the life of a man in whose soul nothing lies waste.[52]

In the Randian sense of objective morality, the principles of ethics emerge and are true because they further the goal one has acknowledged one has in life, something fundamental that the agent has decided (at the moment conceptualization has commenced): namely, to embark on living a human life. One may view this decision as a very basic commitment—an oath taken, as it were—to embark on living a human life. The principles one then becomes aware of, following one's taking of this oath, are akin to the objective principles of, say, mechanical engineering that become required once an engineer chooses to embark on building a bridge or a skyscraper. Given the initial choice, these principles are necessary and clearly identifiable as such.[53] Even as one embarks on playing some game, such as bridge, one commits oneself to following certain rules that are objective, though they are conditional upon the existence of the game (which did not need to exist).

[51] The word "choose" can mislead because it is often used to mean "select," and for selections there need to be several alternatives. This fundamental choice, however, is of the "on versus off" type, so "taking the initiative," which involves moving from rest to motion, more accurately characterizes what may well be going on here.

[52] Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History,* 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 127.

[53] For a detailed discussion, see Machan, "Rand and Choice." At this point, I should make clear that the choice not to live, made at the initial stage of one's life (that is to say, the choice not to initiate one's living) is premoral. One must embark upon life before one is bound by the principles that guide it. Yes, one's flourishing human life is potentially one's end, but it is not one's end in fact without one's having embarked upon living. I should also note that not choosing to live, not initiating one's life process, as it were, is not the same as embarking upon suicide, which is done when one has lived for quite a while and is certainly open to moral criticism by that stage of one's life. Should one decide to commit suicide—maybe justifiably—the method used would also be subject to moral evaluation.

Of course, the Randian version of objective morality assumes free will and assumes that there is a point when a young human being summons himself or herself to the task of thinking. If one rejects these assumptions, which neither Mack nor Rasmussen does, one is opting for a radically non-Randian approach to ethics.

X. Why Is Morality Objective?

As I have already noted, by "objective" I mean that the claims about what one ought to do or ought not to do are capable of being shown to be true by reference to our very long history of experience with and study of facts that are open to any rational mind's apprehension (although not beyond a shadow of doubt).[54] The fact that someone has chosen to embark on living a human life is one such (very general) fact. Other such facts include what the agent's life requires to flourish, namely, the practice of various virtues in the context of who that individual is, what his or her options and resources are, etc. Indeed, a Bill Gates would have to practice the virtue of generosity in very different ways from someone at the poverty line: the specific judgment of how much they each ought to give to charity would be different, though the general judgment that people ought to act generously would hold true.

Without the choice to embark on living one's human life, the self-binding nature of ethics would be missing. Why should one act as ethics—the virtues of living a good human life—would require one to act? The answer is that one should act this way because one has freely accepted the fact that one's primary goal is to live as a human being (i.e., to live in a way that is fitting for the kind of organism one is). Thus, one has committed oneself to what this kind of life requires, on analogy to the more particular case of being bound by the ethics of a given profession that one has taken up as a matter of free choice. For instance, only those not conscripted into the military can be said, properly, to be bound by military ethics, not those who were drafted and made no commitment to live by the principles of military life (although this isn't what, misguidedly, military law requires from conscripts). The same goes, arguably, for any other profession.[55]

In summary, then, what I have tried to show is this: In a naturalist metaethics such as what we find in Ayn Rand's "The Objectivist Ethics"—as well as in Martha Nussbaum's *Therapy of Desire* and in Philippa Foot's

[54] This is why objecting to conclusions on these matters on the grounds that it is logically possible (i.e., that there is no formal contradiction in the denial) that they aren't so is irrelevant. As Wittgenstein puts it, "The reasonable man does not have certain doubts" (Wittgenstein, *On Certainty,* 29e). That is, some doubts are unreasonable.

[55] For more on this point, see Tibor R. Machan and James E. Chesher, *A Primer on Business Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003). See also the introductory essay, "Ethics and Its Uses," in Tibor R. Machan, *Commerce and Morality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1988).

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Natural Goodness—an objective ethical position can be developed based on a sound understanding of human nature (that is, an understanding derived from experience and the study of and reflection upon human nature). In Rand's and my version, however, two vital issues are central to the substantive ethics that emerges: namely, individuality and freedom of the will.[56]

What comes out of this inquiry is a system of moral virtues to guide one in living a good or excellent human life to which one has made a commitment as a rational individual, a commitment that binds one to act according to judgments based on such a system of virtues. The particulars, of course, will be quite cumbersome to identify and will require, in most cases, knowledge of the individual agent who is to act in one or another way ("local" knowledge). But this is no different from how, in attending properly, prudently to one's physical well-being, one will need to know one's body, as well as general principles of sound medicine, nutrition, and the like.

It seems to me that this approach to ethics preserves a reasonable conception of objectivity for ethical judgments. It is also an approach that reflects quite faithfully how most people make their day-to-day ethical decisions in life (especially if they aren't guided by various skeptically conceived metaethical theories). What may be important to mention here, although the development of the idea would require considerably more space than I have at my disposal, is that the concept "objectivity" could itself be contextual rather than what it is widely taken to be, namely, just one sort of process or method involved in gaining knowledge.[57] Objective knowledge of A will most likely reflect in certain important respects the ontology of A—what type or even kind of being A is. Obtaining objective knowledge, in short, will not amount to an identical process in each case because what this knowledge is *of* will be reflected in what it is to know it objectively. To put it somewhat differently, since objectivity concerns the means by which knowledge is obtained—the type of evidence and argument required to gain knowledge of the world as it is—it makes good sense to suppose that if different facts about the world provide different sorts of evidence and argument by which to learn of them, the objectivity at issue will itself be different in these cases.[58]

This explains, in the most general terms, why objectivity in ethics is not identical to objectivity in, say, chemistry or psychology. Objectivity is in

[56] Martha Nussbaum, in contrast, seems to be concerned with the human good without giving a central role to choice. I discuss Nussbaum in Tibor R. Machan, *Libertarianism Defended* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), chap. 19, "Two Philosophers Skeptical of Negative Liberty."

[57] Of course, if (in fact, in the realm of ontology) everything is the same type or kind of being (e.g., matter-in-motion, sense data, spirit, or whatever), then objectivity will involve just what it takes to properly grasp this one type or kind of being.

[58] In this account, truth is a property of judgments or statements, not of abstractly existing propositions. An unknown or unknowable truth is, accordingly, nonsense.

part related to what type or kind of being one knows. In ethics, since objectivity involves coming to know the guidelines for human conduct (the conduct of a volitionally conscious living being), it follows that the very objectivity of the knowledge will reflect this. Accordingly, unlike in, say, chemistry, in ethics objective knowledge is conditional upon whether the being that is to be guided by the principles of ethics has made the choice to commence or embark on its life. Objective knowledge is also, following Aristotle, a matter of "for the most part," not akin to principles in geometry but more akin to those in medicine. The point of such an ethics is to provide guidelines toward achieving the good life of the organism in question—in this case, of a human being.

If this is the right way to understand objectivity as far as moral knowledge is concerned, what are we to make of an influential viewpoint considered by Thomas Nagel in connection with Bernard Williams's ethical position?[59] Nagel notes that Williams ridicules the idea that "if liberalism is correct, it must apply to all those past people who were not liberals: they ought to have been liberals, and since they were not, they were bad, or stupid, or something on those lines."[60] The suggestion from Williams is clearly that the idea of objective morality is misguided because moral judgments are not universalizable.[61]

Yet the contextual theory of knowledge that Rand develops and others have elaborated would address the issue with which Williams is concerned (according to Nagel's succinct statement of Williams's point). Certainly Williams's viewpoint is a very plausible one: few would insist that the interpersonal ethics or political institutions of ancient Greece ought to have conformed to modern principles of right conduct or of justice. This is what is so insightfully developed by the political theorist Hanna F. Pitkin in her analysis of the concept of justice as both stable and variable throughout human history.[62] Thus, to repeat a point I have made elsewhere, "certain principles and truths do endure despite all the variations. For example, although there are options in how children might be raised, some basic ideas do remain true in any human community, any era. It is understood that parents have the responsibility to prepare their children for adulthood—a basic and universal moral assumption. . . ."[63] Of course, just what will constitute such preparation in the fourth century B.C., as

[59] Thomas Nagel, "The View from Here and Now," *London Review of Books* 28, no. 9 (May 11, 2006). (For my purposes, Nagel's summary captures the critical point that Williams voices.)

[60] Ibid., 10.

[61] For more on this, see Machan, "Why It Appears That Objective Ethical Claims Are Subjective."

[62] Hanna F. Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972). See also Tibor R. Machan, "Can There Be Stable and Lasting Principles?" *International Journal of Social Economics* 32, no. 1/2 (2005): 218–27.

[63] Machan, "Can There Be Stable and Lasting Principles?" 225.

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compared to the twenty-first century A.D., will differ, so the moral claims valid at each time will also differ, even though they can be equally true and though they are based on lasting and stable moral principles. Moreover, we can multiply examples by considering how we ought to act in innumerable circumstances.

The point Nagel attributes to Williams—that "personal ethics and political morality cannot aspire to the kind of objective validity that is a reasonable aim for science and mathematics"[64]—is not accurate. In science, there is variation based on historical context, not unlike in ethics and political morality, given that the facts available for cognizance at different points in the history of science vary in both the natural and the social sciences. Mathematics is different—although even there some similarities arise, based on context[65]—mainly because mathematics is a formal discipline, like logic.

XI. Summing Up for Objectivity

This has been a short discussion of an issue that arises in metaethics. The issue has been addressed via Ayn Rand's attempt to defend the objectivity of ethics. I have attempted to briefly but accurately show why Rand believed that ethical knowledge is objective—that human beings can know what is morally right and wrong—based on her understanding of "objective" 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."[66]

Ayn Rand called her philosophy Objectivism because she wanted to be known as someone who defended our ability to know the world as it is, not as distorted or constructed by our minds, not as we wish it to be, etc. Subjectivism and relativism propose these other positions and Rand was against them; indeed, she considered those who promoted them, such as Immanuel Kant, vicious.

When it came to one of the most controversial areas of human knowledge, namely, ethics or morality, Rand insisted that she was an objectivist here as well, unlike, say, the economists Milton Friedman and Ludwig von Mises, who denied that we can know (objectively) what is right or wrong. Friedman, for example, wrote:

> The liberal conceives of men as imperfect beings. He regards the problem of social organization to be as much a negative problem of

[64] Nagel, "The View from Here and Now," 10.

[65] For an example of how context matters in formal disciplines, see Imre Lakatos, *Mathematics, Science, and Epistemology,* ed. John Worrall and Gregory Currie (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

[66] Ayn Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology,* 54.

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> preventing "bad" people from doing harm as of enabling "good" people to do good; and, of course, "bad" and "good" people may be the same people, depending on who is judging them.[67]

Yet Rand's ethical objectivism isn't all that simple. She isn't a straightforward realist who believes that ethical principles are evident in the world independently of human existence. This is what is implied by objectivity in, say, the natural sciences. If a principle of physics or chemistry is objective, that means the principle is part of the world regardless of whether anyone knows it to be so. For Rand, ethical objectivism is not like this. The reason is that without human beings or some beings very much like them, there would be no principles of ethics or virtues. For Rand, ethics emerges with human (or possibly some very similar) life only. Once we have human beings living their lives, ethics does apply to them, and this is knowable by us as an objective fact. Nonetheless, there is something conditional about this type of objectivity, namely, the fact that human life is a free option to each individual.

Rand advanced the view that only when one makes the choice to live and think (which are practically the same thing, as she understood them) does one become bound by the principles that must guide human living. This idea has proven to be quite controversial. Do people generally make a choice to live and think? Or are they pretty much living and thinking beings without any choice to be such (just as they have no choice about whether to be born)? If the latter, then it would seem that the principles of ethics are binding on them independently of any choice, as a necessary and not conditional aspect of their lives. Why would Rand think that this isn't the case?

Before answering that question, it bears noting that conditional principles can be every bit as objective as unconditional ones. For example, let us take it that the principle of gravitation is unconditional and necessary (although in some very broad metaphysical sense it might well be conditional: if no objects with mass existed, there would be no gravitation). Let us take the principles of a sport or game in which, while the game (say, baseball or bridge) need not have existed at all, once it does, there are principles or standards of conduct that are (conditionally) necessary. In bridge or baseball, if one wants to get something done—make a bid or hit a home run—there are certain ways one must go about doing it; not just any way will do. Of course, the rules of the game could be changed, but similarly, if (improbably) human nature were to change, the principles of ethics would change as well. And this could be objectively ascertained.

Rand believed that human beings have free will, so whether they will take up the task of living and thinking is up to them. They initiate these

[67] Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 12.

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tasks; they are not instinctual or automatic. Rand held, in consequence, that whether a person is bound by the principles of ethics is in the last analysis up to him, although the alternative would be annihilation (and thus effectively irrelevant). As she put the point:

> 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.[68]

As with many aspects of Ayn Rand's philosophy, her views on the objectivity of ethics and on free will are only sketchily laid out by her. Only in the field of epistemology did she advance a fairly detailed and in-depth theory. Nonetheless, as sketched by her and related here, there seems to be nothing amiss in the Randian idea of objectivity in ethics. Once we commit to living our human lives—and there is no other option, other than fading out of existence—we are freely but firmly bound (by our own choice to live our human lives) to the principles of ethics which are knowable by us. (In the special areas of human life, the same holds: it is only once one decides to become a doctor or a lawyer, for example, that the ethics of the profession become binding.)

In the end, then, I believe I may now conclude that it is most likely true that objectivity is possible in ethics, provided that knowledge is conceived in an essentially non-Platonist, non-idealist fashion and provided that "objective" is not taken to mean that moral values are intrinsic.[69]

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[68] Ayn Rand, *Philosophy: Who Needs It?* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1982), 118. But see also her hero's statement in her novel *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1992): "This, in every hour and every issue, is your basic moral choice: thinking or non-thinking, existence or non-existence, A or non-A, entity or zero" (1020). This suggests that even what Rand takes to be the premoral choice is subject to moral evaluation. I take her here, however, to be referring to the choices one makes *following having made the basic choice* that, so to speak, constitutes one's entry into the moral universe. One might see it, again, on analogy with someone having made the choice to be a doctor, after which he or she is committed to paying close attention to medical matters. But prior to that choice, no such obligation exists.

[69] This is a crucial point stressed by Ayn Rand throughout her discussion of objectivity in all her writings, but especially in her *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology.*

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