

Introduction

A moral code prescribes proper human conduct. Whether articulated in rules, virtues, commandments, principles, or some other form, a moral code instructs action. Ayn Rand advocated selfishness. This, too, requires a moral code. The goal of selfishness is personal happiness, yet the means of attaining that are far from self-evident. Thus, Rand prescribes rational egoism, a code that consists of virtues such as honesty, justice, productiveness, and pride.¹

Analyses of egoism tend to concentrate on the kinds of actions that it prescribes, which is natural, given the radical departure of its instruction from virtually all conventional moral codes. Indeed, I have devoted a book to Rand's account of the virtues, which she regarded as principles of action.² In the present book, however, I wish to probe certain other factors that are less directly subject to conscious decision but that nonetheless exert considerable influence on an individual's practice of egoism. For even if a person subscribes to egoism and conscientiously strives to practice it, certain internalized, subconscious dispositions can work against his success. A deep-set aversion to failure, for instance, or an acute fear of personal rejection can inhibit a person's ventures in ways that limit his prospects for happiness.

The book's terrain is thus psychological as well as philosophical. While a person's philosophy consists of his avowed positions on certain fundamental questions (concerning reality, values, human nature, and so on), his psychology is more interior and more automatized than consciously supervised. A person's psychology consists of his characteristic patterns of mental and emotional functioning; it comprises his tendencies toward particular kinds of thoughts, attitudes, emotions, and actions. A psychology is the largely unconscious mental/emotional stance with which a person experiences life and approaches life—the ways that events register, for him, and the ways that he characteristically tackles choices and actions.³ A person's conscious convictions and his subconscious beliefs are not necessarily in harmony, however. A person will sometimes hold ideas that he is not fully aware of and that clash with his considered convictions.⁴ For this reason, it is instructive to explore some of the psychological underbrush that can impede the fluid leading of an egoistic life. By attending not only to the kinds of deliberate policies that Rand's egoism prescribes but to these additional factors that often color a person's choices, we can gain a fuller appreciation of what rational egoism involves.

Thus, my subject, you might say, is *living* egoism—the ways in which a person implements his endorsement of egoism along with the ways in which he feels his egoism. Internalizing key convictions about morality and about oneself is critical for a person to optimize his practice of egoism and to reap its full rewards.

To explore these issues, I will examine four phenomena that are pivotal to an egoist's success: a person's most basic motivation for following the course that he does along with his beliefs about what that basic motivation *should* be; the role of desires in objective self-interest; a person's exertion of independence; a person's possession of self-esteem. The significance of desire, I think, has often been shortchanged in discussions of rational egoism, most likely due to a misunderstanding of Rand's insistence that egoism be rational. Even more crucial to the proper practice of Rand's egoism, however, is a person's fundamental motivation—that is, his fundamental reason for doing things and his beliefs about what constitutes proper motivation, about what it is that legitimately holds final authority over him. A proper view of this fundamental “justification” is indispensable to the healthy practice of egoism. A better understanding of these first two phenomena (desire and fundamental motivation), in turn, will lead us to more readily appreciate the need for strong in-

dependence and self-esteem. All four, I argue, are mutually supportive anchors of successful egoism.

Having characterized my subject as “living egoism,” I should clarify the book’s scope. It does not attempt to flesh out all further aspects of Rand’s view of a flourishing life beyond those that have received the most attention in previous scholarship. Its particular, narrower focus, rather, is on psychological issues, as I wrestle with a handful of pivotal yet largely unnoticed ways in which an avowed egoist might foster or impede his own success through internalized psychological mechanisms.

Accordingly, the book leaves large regions of a fully egoistic life unexplored. A complete portrait of Rand’s view of the major components of flourishing would have to include the role of work, for instance, the role of art, and the unique contribution of personal relationships. Rand’s regard for the value of all three is profound. Her most mature novels, *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, showcase the central value of productive work and of positive personal relationships. (While these are of significantly divergent types, the relationships depicted in *The Fountainhead* between Roark and Dominique, Roark and Mike, and Roark and Wynand, for instance, and in *Atlas*, the relationships between Dagny and Rearden, Dagny and Francisco, Dagny and Galt, the respect and affection that develop between Rearden and the Wet Nurse, between Rearden and Francisco, between Dagny and Cheryl and between Dagny and the tramp, as well as the palpable bonds among the strikers in the valley and Francisco’s reverential explanation of the meaning of sex, all testify to relationships’ vibrant contribution to happiness, in Rand’s view.)⁵ To explain exactly how art and work fit into an egoistic life and to do justice to the complexities of our social relations, however (relations that encompass friendships, romantic love, parenting, and siblings, among other types), would require extensive analysis that lies beyond the purview of this project. My point is simply that the absence of such discussions here is in no way meant to suggest a lesser status for these dimensions of a happy life. They are crucial to full flourishing. My focus on the psychological, however, constrains our subject matter.⁶

1. Principal Theses

If this much lays out the subject, let me now elaborate on my principal theses.

I will argue that a proper understanding of the authority of morality is critical to rational egoism. More specifically, my thesis is that moral-

ity's authority originates in the individual's wish to be happy. The desire for his personal happiness is what creates morality's claim on him. Morality holds no authority apart from the individual's assent, which consists in the fact that he wishes to live and to flourish (if, indeed, he does). The central contention, in other words, is that rational egoism stands on fully selfish motivation. The substance of egoism's guidance flows from this animating aim. Accordingly, egoism is a theory not only of *how* to lead one's life, but of *why* one should lead it in this way. Egoism encompasses an account not only of what a person should pursue (by helping him to recognize what is truly in his interest), but of the reasons that he should. Its position on the latter, in fact, is the foundation for egoism's guidance and its ability to help those who embrace it to achieve genuine flourishing.

We cannot fully understand egoism, I argue, without reckoning with these questions of fundamental motivation. What is the ultimate driver of an individual's actions? What is his bedrock reason for valuing anything or for doing anything? And what does he believe should be his bedrock driver? A person cannot achieve happiness unless his fundamental motivation is, unqualifiedly, his happiness. His commitment to that must be total. Leading a good life is not a matter of compliance with a set of preexisting imperatives, such as those decreed by religious edicts or social expectations. For rational egoism, a person's fundamental sanction lies within. Indeed, his embrace of his happiness as his highest end is not actually a sanction, at all, so much as the recognition that his desire to be happy is all the sanction he needs. The pursuit of happiness does not require a license. The belief that it does would doom the enterprise.

Implicit in all of this is the recognition that a person does not need to validate himself. He does not need to earn permission to pursue his happiness. Many people seem to hold, at least implicitly, a reflexive respect for morality's commands as inherently compelling. Consequently, even while they might consciously endorse egoism, in their actual practice, they frequently treat egoism's directives as operative only within the constraints permitted by that intrinsically superior authority. A gap often develops, in other words, between what an egoist ostensibly believes his reasons for action should be (namely, his own well-being) and what he actually treats as providing overriding reasons for action. This straitjackets egoism in ways that prevent it from working. Egoism *under the supervision of non-egoistic strictures* is not egoism. The conditional

instruction “Be selfish, as long as you comply with these freestanding moral commands” subordinates the self and undercuts egoism’s ability to actually help a person.

Rational egoism is egoism without permission. It recognizes no obligation to acquire some sort of external, non-egoistic sanction or authorization. It does not regard personal happiness as a guilty pleasure.

This much indicates my core thesis. I will also argue that desire, independence, and self-esteem are vital arteries of rational egoism, for all three nourish the kind of wholly selfish motivation that is needed to achieve happiness.

Desires supply crucial groundwork for egoism. A person’s reason for being moral stems from the fact that he *wants* a happy life. Far from being a threat to the rationality of egoism, we will see, desires are its necessary condition. Indeed, desires are indispensable in establishing an end that *is* an individual’s interest. Without desire, nothing could be objectively valuable to a person.

Selfishly grounded egoism also draws on an individual’s independence and self-esteem. A person could not embrace his desire for happiness as sufficiently weighty to serve as his fundamental warrant if he were not committed to his first-handed judgment (independence) and the conviction of his basic worthiness of achieving happiness (self-esteem). By the same token, independence and self-esteem are themselves fortified by the adoption of a fully egoistic posture on morality’s authority. A person could not experience strong self-esteem if he accepted the idea that he must earn his place at the table of life. And he could not characteristically rely on his judgment in the face of others’ conflicting judgments (i.e., exert independence) if he believed that his judgment might at any time be vetoed by a superior authority whose logic he does not see for himself. (In other words, if he regarded his judgment as subservient to various forms of non-egoistic duty.) Such readiness to surrender judgment *by* the self is inimical to the commitment to advance the self.

My central contention, again, is that selfish motivation stands at the foundation of egoism’s authority and that an individual’s grasping that is essential for his practice of egoism to be successful. Morality’s directives exert a claim on a person only if and because the person seeks the happiness that morality can help him to achieve. The egoist, accordingly, regards his own happiness as his most fundamental reason for action and the only “justification” of his course.⁷

2. Context and Aims

The book's basic supposition is that man does not live on intellectual premises alone. It is not simply *what* a person believes that will affect his course (the tenets he might endorse if completing a questionnaire, for instance); it is also what he does with his beliefs. An egoist might think all the right things concerning the purpose of morality, values, virtues, and the like, without necessarily pursuing his interest in the most sensible ways. For we live not by abstractions per se, but by the application of abstractions to our particular circumstances. It behooves us, therefore, to understand the mechanisms by which we do so.

Every human being naturally develops characteristic ways of dealing with his experience. Over time and often without notice, we automatize particular modes of responding to the world around us; we develop habits of judging, of feeling, of wanting, of acting. If sound ideas are to steadily guide a person's living, he must build those ideas into his system, make them "a part of him," as we sometimes say. As Leonard Peikoff, the foremost explicator of Rand's philosophy, advises, "Once one knows the right moral principles, the next step is to build them into one's soul by repeated rational action. One must make these principles 'second nature,' in the Aristotelian sense of the term."⁸

Rational egoism cannot be reduced to a checklist of virtues. A moral code's guidance is invaluable, but it does not exhaust the considerations that a person must attend to in order to achieve happiness. If a person does not realize that his own psychological patterns can affect the way that he views his alternatives, the evaluations that he makes, or the kinds of goals that he adopts, he is unlikely to discover distortions that impede his identification of the best, self-interested course. If he does not realize that his intense aversion to risk in a particular case, for instance, stems not from valid conclusions about the relevant dangers in that situation so much as from entrenched beliefs about his own wider inadequacy, he is unlikely to make the best decisions about which risks are worth running. Similarly, if a person is blind to deep insecurities about his basic worth, these can skew his interpretations of others' actions and foster a thin-skinned defensiveness or an overactive propensity to take offense that alienates other people and makes it difficult to forge intimate relationships. Psychological problems are "problems" precisely because they court harmful effects.

Admittedly, such subsurface elements of one's psyche can be harder

to manage than intellectual conclusions, insofar as they are less visible and less directly under a person's control. ("Less directly under" does not mean "completely beyond.") They are rarely deliberately chosen, their formation is usually gradual, and their influence can be circuitous. Insofar as such elements can exert a considerable influence on the way that a person frames his options and makes choices, however, a responsible account of egoism must take them into account. For when it comes to human action, the cliché is misleading: out of sight does not mean out of mind. The fact that something is not in a person's present conscious awareness does not mean that it is devoid of influence.⁹

The aims of the project, then, are straightforward. At the broadest level, I hope to refine our understanding of Rand's rational egoism and the self-interest to which it is devoted. By examining certain usually overlooked factors in the experience of a good life, I hope to color in a more vivid and more realistic portrait of both the prize that successful egoism would deliver and of what following an egoistic course involves. My more specific aim, however, is to illuminate the psychological profile of egoism. Most particularly, I hope to demonstrate the crucial role of a person's fundamental motivation in underwriting the authority of an egoistic moral code. By understanding that self-interest goes "all the way down" to a person's most deep-seated reason for caring about moral prescriptions and by appreciating that the source of morality's authority resides wholly in the individual's wish to enjoy his life, we gain the foundation for a fuller understanding of how to be rationally self-interested.

A correlative aim is to rescue desire from the shadowy sidelines in which it often lurks. I have known many people who sincerely subscribe to egoism but who do not entirely practice it—and thus do not fully benefit from it—because they remain at a wary distance from their desires, not fully believing that their desires "count" or are sufficiently weighty to matter very much in charting a moral course. By squarely confronting the role of desire in self-interest, I hope to disentangle egoism from certain overly intellectualized conceptions of it and liberate desire to assume its proper place in the direction of a good life.

Consonant with all this, I hope to reach two kinds of readers: theorists who seek a fuller understanding of Rand's moral theory and those who are already sympathetic to it—rational egoism's would-be practitioners. My belief is that the more textured portrait of egoism that I attempt here, sensitive to simple realities of psychological life and their impact on a person's happiness, can inform a more layered, more nuanced concep-

tion of what genuine self-interest and its rational pursuit consist of. My emphasis on the role of personal desires in establishing what an individual's interest is, for example, should counter robotic images sometimes associated with rational egoism, just as our exploration of the various challenges of applying the egoistic code should make plain its distance from subjectivism and hedonism, with which it is often confused. All of this will better position any student of moral theory to render a judicious evaluation. It should be of particular value for those interested in virtue ethics and theories of well-being or flourishing.

At the same time, I also hope to offer those who embrace Rand's egoism a helpful supplement to existing analyses of her theory. Scholarship on Rand's ethics has not fully probed some of the less intentional dimensions that I investigate here, and deepening our understanding of these can significantly enhance a person's ability to practice egoism effectively. The point of egoism is personal happiness, after all—the individual's optimal enjoyment of his life. Any help to that should be welcome.

I should also make clear that this is not an introduction to Rand's ethics. I do not seek to present the alphabet of Rand's egoism, explaining all its major planks, nor do I seek to defend it. In other work, I have laid out much of why I think the case for egoism makes sense. In *Viable Values: A Study of Life as the Root and Reward of Morality*, I explain Rand's validation of values and in *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist*, I examine the prescriptions for action that her code of moral virtues encapsulates.¹⁰ The aim in this book, by contrast, is to develop our understanding of Rand's theory by considering some hitherto neglected aspects that are critical to the way in which egoism actually plays out in the day, rather than on the page. Accordingly, the book presupposes familiarity with the basic elements of Rand's moral theory. While I will discuss one important portion of her theory in chapter 2 (briefly), it will be difficult for a reader to fully understand my reasoning throughout the book unless he is already acquainted with at least the fundamental tenets and arguments of Rand's moral thought.¹¹

3. Preliminaries

Before beginning, I should say a little more to clarify the character of what follows. The book's subject falls within the broad territory of moral psychology.¹² My inquiry draws on readily recognizable features of human beings' psychological experience to inform our understanding of morality's guidance—to condition expectations of what a moral code

can and cannot offer and to refine our ideas concerning what a person should do in order to promote his well-being. Much of the project is concerned with what Rand would call the psycho-epistemology of egoism, inasmuch as it explores the ways in which a person's subconscious beliefs and automatized methods of thinking can affect his more conscious thinking about moral issues and related decision-making.¹³

The project should not be mistaken for an exercise in psychologizing, a practice that Rand explicitly cautioned against. Rand understood psychologizing to consist of “condemning or excusing specific individuals on the grounds of their psychological problems, real or invented, in the absence of or contrary to factual evidence.”¹⁴ “A man's moral character must be judged on the basis of his actions, his statements and his conscious convictions,” she writes, “not on the basis of inferences (usually, spurious) about his subconscious. A man is not to be condemned or excused on the grounds of the state of his subconscious.”¹⁵ This does not mean, it should be obvious, that Rand considered all discussion of psychology out of bounds for moral philosophy. She elaborates, “In dealing with people, one necessarily draws conclusions about their characters, which involves their psychology, since every character judgment refers to man's consciousness. But it is a man's *subconscious* and his *psychopathology* that have to be left alone, particularly in moral evaluations.”¹⁶ Accordingly, to theorize about healthy, happiness-conducive psychological practices is not to engage in the type of ungrounded judgments that she advises against here. Indeed, Rand's own work frequently offers psychological commentary. Her fiction is studded with characterizations that offer insight concerning certain types of mentality and her essays often penetrate to the motives behind people's adoption of certain views.¹⁷ Insofar as psychologizing means basing moral judgment of a particular individual on speculation about his psychological problems *without or in defiance of the evidence*, none of the discussion that follows approaches that.

This occasions a related clarification: the book is not intended as a course of moralizing. Its purpose is not to issue moral verdicts on individuals' psychological practices, but to isolate pivotal yet often hidden factors that can work against a person's achievement of happiness. Doing so can help us find means of cultivating more salutary methods of mental functioning. Just as the field of psychology adopts a medical rather than a moral stance on people's behavior, so this inquiry assumes the perspective of clinical diagnosis rather than moral judgment.¹⁸ (Clinical philosophical analysis, that is; I am not a trained psychologist.)

While I do not wish to moralize our issues, it would equally be a mistake to de-moralize the issues by pretending that all self-damaging tendencies are beyond a person's control. (In this context, I use "control" to encompass the ability to influence as well as to completely determine, since human beings are frequently in the position to exert influence over phenomena without holding complete control over them.) Sometimes, I think, we hastily attribute a person's moral failings (or what are at least potentially moral failings) to his "psychological problems," conceiving of those as arising in a fully separate, amoral zone and thus sparing ourselves the potentially uncomfortable task of reaching a moral evaluation of another person. The fact is, some mistakes are culpable, others are not. Many are culpable to some degree, but not entirely. For this reason, we cannot pronounce a universal moral status, *Psychological errors, innocent!* Being an egoist entails the responsibility to work to identify and correct one's counterproductive psychological habits—a responsibility that is rooted in one's own self-interest. And that is what this book hopes to assist. It would be pointless to accept moral responsibility for choices over which one holds no influence, but it would be self-defeating to minimize responsibility for circumstances that one can influence.

Finally, a note about terminology. My subject is Rand's account of rational egoism, but I will frequently refer to it as simply "egoism," without the qualifier, using "egoism" and "rational egoism" interchangeably. The reader should assume that I am speaking of Rand's concept of rational egoism unless the context clearly indicates otherwise. Also, I will use several terms as equivalents for self-interest, such as "well-being," "flourishing," "happiness," "life," "survival," and "welfare." While each invites a somewhat different stream of connotations, I will not address these until much later, when we directly examine self-interest in chapter 5. For now, I simply alert the reader to this practice. Because these terms all refer to what is essentially the same phenomenon, it should not be problematic.¹⁹

4. Outline

My overarching aim, I have said, is to deepen our understanding of Rand's rational egoism by showing that selfish motivation is crucial to living in a rationally self-interested way. I hope to do this by examining the dynamics among four low-profile, largely psychological factors in an individual's well-being, namely, a person's beliefs concerning the need for a fundamental sanction; his attitude toward his desires; his in-

dependence; his self-esteem. A clearer grasp of each sheds light on the others and a better understanding of the set of them, in turn, enriches our understanding of interest and its sensible pursuit. The book is thus divided into two main parts. Part 1 examines each of the four psychological levers. Part 2 traces the implications for a broader understanding of what a person's self-interest genuinely is and, correspondingly, of what rational egoism is.

I begin, in chapter 1, by examining the role of desire in a person's leading a self-interested life. What is the relationship between a person's desires and his flourishing? Between desire and values? Given Rand's belief that values are objective, how can desires, which are highly variable, enter in? And how does the rationality of egoism square with the fact that desires are, notoriously, not necessarily rational?

Chapter 2 concerns a person's beliefs about the fundamental justification of his course. What are a person's bedrock drivers, the most basic considerations that move him to action? And what does he regard as properly playing that motivational role? At bottom, does he adhere to egoism in order to be good or in order to be happy? (In more colloquial terms, who does he consider the boss: morality, or his self-interest?) This discussion makes plain that it is not only the content of egoism's prescriptions that is self-interested, but its underlying rationale. A deep-seated selfishness of soul underwrites the kind of vigorous, unqualified exertion of egoism that is necessary for an individual's flourishing.

The next chapters explore the relationship between these first issues and two phenomena that are already well-recognized in the Objectivist ethics, the virtue of independence (chapter 3) and the value of self-esteem (chapter 4). Both are major conduits of a person's flourishing and both, we will see, are heavily influenced by a person's attitudes toward his desires and his basic sanction. I also probe the relationship between self-esteem and independence themselves, finding that self-esteem is at once a partial result of independence and a source of it, insofar as it incentivizes the exercise of independence.²⁰

In the second part of the book, I turn to the wider subjects of self-interest and egoism, drawing on lessons from the first four issues to enrich our understanding of what a human being's interest consists of and of what its rational pursuit involves. Broadly, a conception of egoism can be misguided in either of two basic ways: concerning what a person's interest is or concerning the best means of promoting a person's interest. Chapter 5 focuses on the first. It elaborates on human flourishing (inter-

est) as a kind of action as well as a feeling and on the important respect in which flourishing is self-generated. It further explains the multidimensional character of a person's flourishing, the objectivity of flourishing, and the roles of desire, motivation, independence, and self-esteem in fueling it. By recognizing the varied kinds of components that contribute to a good life and the ways in which flourishing is at once personalized and objective, I hope to offer a more true-to-experience account of what a human being's interest is than often figures in debates over egoism.

(Note a curious aspect of such debates: When philosophers and psychologists discuss human flourishing or well-being, they typically proceed along the usual tracks of sober academic analysis. Theorists differ, naturally, over the exact features that distinguish flourishing or well-being, but the discussions basically proceed along constructive scholarly lines marked by respect for evidence, efforts to represent opposing views accurately, the interpretive principle of charity, and so forth. Once the subject of flourishing is folded within the context of egoism, however—and especially, within anyone's advocacy of egoism—scholars seem to lose their bearings and inquiry often takes a turn for the worse. Specious notions of self-interest are attributed to the egoist that would not withstand even the briefest serious reflection about what a person's well-being genuinely is. Many people readily assume almost transparently foolish images of self-interest and proceed to battle straw men. A more thoughtful conception of interest is, if nothing else, essential for an accurate understanding and just appraisal of egoism.)

Finally, chapter 6 elaborates on some of the major implications of all of this for Rand's prescription of egoism. Because egoism is more than the rejection of altruism, a refusal to sacrifice oneself for others is not sufficient for understanding the manner in which one can most healthily lead a flourishing life. As throughout, my aim in the chapter is not to paint a complete portrait of egoism, but to spotlight select features whose significance is especially exposed by our probing of egoism's motivational depths. Accordingly, this chapter considers the integral role of feelings and of personal, self-chosen ends in rational egoism; the need for dedicated introspection and self-knowledge; the objectivity of egoism's prescriptions; and egoism's distance from its dominant public image (as adversarial, for example, or as innate).

Stepping back from this chapter-by-chapter breakdown, one might think of our discussion as falling into three concentric circles. At the core of

the book stands the question of fundamental sanction, a person's beliefs about his most basic reason for action. Radiating out from that are a person's attitudes toward desire, his independence, and his self-esteem. And at a final, still wider ring, we reconsider self-interest itself and its pursuit through egoism, both of whose meanings emerge in sharper relief thanks to the earlier, semi-psychological inquiries.

My central contention, again, is that the authority of morality stems from an individual's unapologetic commitment to his happiness as an end in itself. It depends, in other words, on his being animated by fully selfish motivation. The egoist's happiness is his reason for being, correspondingly, his happiness is his reason for being moral. A person could not embrace such a commitment, however, without believing in the ultimate authority of his desire. And he could not believe that, in turn, without substantial quotients of independence and self-esteem. These four serve as vital infrastructure for rational egoism. And for the happiness that it makes possible.