

OBJECTIVISM AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

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The Big Questions

Anyone strongly influenced by Ayn Rand who has not had doubts about the value of Objectivism, has not reflected deeply enough on her philosophy. Rand's systematic vision of life is radical, provocative, and innovative - yet incomplete, often vitriolic, and sometimes just plain wrongheaded. Furthermore, because of the rhetorical seductiveness of her writing style, it can be enormously challenging to integrate her ideas into your life without subordinating your personal nature to a symbolic ideal. Yet the fundamental fact that both the quest for truth and the inner experience of life are at bottom solitary pursuits (no matter how deeply affected you are by other people) implies that the meaning of life can be found only by remaining true to your own nature and experience.

There are enough tensions (not to say outright contradictions) here to lead to serious inner conflict, repression, and disconnection from the reality of your own needs. The question is whether a better life - a life of "joy and reason and meaning" - awaits if you are able to separate the bad from the good in Rand's thought, integrate the good into your daily life, and thereby make real the core value of Objectivist insights.

Essential to the question of the enduring value of Objectivism is the question of the values of Objectivism: what does Objectivism hold out as the core values of human existence, and why? Do these values comport with what you, based on your own experience, hold to be most important in life and most reflective of the highest human potential? Is the Objectivist network or system of values comprehensive, or does it ignore key human values and therefore fall short of the ideal?

These are large questions, and I do not pretend to have answered them in a short essay, nor even to have raised all of the relevant questions. However, I would like to adumbrate my approach to the big questions in order to stimulate your own reflections on the meaning of Ayn Rand's philosophy (even on philosophy in general). My intention is that this essay be a point of departure for you, not the final destination.

Core Capacities and Cardinal Values

In opposition to the scholarly minutiae of much contemporary thought, I hold that philosophy performs its highest function when it focuses its attention on the

core questions of the meaning of human experience. And further, I hold that the best way to seek answers to those questions is to grapple with the timeless enigma that is human nature and to attempt to understand the fundamental capacities of the human individual. Based on my long-time reflections on Rand's philosophy and my own experience of life, I think that there are four fundamental capacities of the human individual:

- Thought - the capacity for understanding reality.
- Choice - the capacity for selectively directing your attention to those aspects of reality you find most interesting or important.
- Action - the capacity for implementing your thoughts and choices by creating value in the world.
- Feeling - the capacity for emotionally experiencing success (or the lack of it) in applying the three other core capacities.

In my essay "A Philosophy for Living on Earth", I adduced numerous passages in Rand's writings to substantiate my claim that Objectivism holds these four capacities to form the core of human nature. Based on these four capacities (i.e. as their highest, most positive realization), I see four core or cardinal values in Objectivism:

- Conceptualization - the existential expression of cognitive efficacy, which consists in the activity of using your consciousness to gain knowledge about reality.
- Self-Direction - making your volition efficacious through consciously choosing your values and honoring your interests in life.
- Achievement - a commitment to the active creation of value in existence, to making your chosen values real in the world.
- Enjoyment - the positive emotional experience of successful conceptualization, self-direction, and achievement.

From Abstract to Particular

By focusing here on cardinal values, I do not mean to give short shrift either to their foundation in the value of life or to their expression in everyday living. Indeed, I see the cardinal values as a bridge between the most abstract level of value (life) and the more particular values that one pursues day-to-day.

Regarding the value of life, I see the core human ca-

pacities as fundamentally capacities for living. Thought, choice, action, and feeling enable you to be successful at the task of living a good human life, which includes understanding life as well as experiencing the emotional side of your actions and relationships.

Regarding the more particular values, I see the cardinal values as broad categories under which those everyday values can be subsumed as instances - in technical terms, as dimensions along which measurement of those particular values can take place. While we could make an exhaustive list of particular values (such as reason, truth, honesty, directness, clarity of purpose, expressiveness, openness to emotion, creativity, physical and emotional health, security, property, wealth, love, friendship, etc.), all of these particular values can be seen as instances of one or more of the cardinal values. Let me present a few examples:

- Friendship - I find that friends give me great pleasure, that they support me in my endeavors to create value, that the example of who they are inspires me to be more morally ambitious and directed in the pursuit of my values, and that through my discussions with them they help me understand my own perspective and life in general. In other words, I can measure friendship (and any particular friendship) along the dimensions of enjoyment, achievement, self-direction, and understanding.
- Work - call me a workaholic, but I think work is fun! Work is also a prime example of creating value in the world, of achieving goals and applying values. I find that work gives me an expansive field for self-direction, for choosing what I'd like to pursue in life, for selectively attending to what I find interesting and important. Work, if done well, also involves a great deal of thought.
- Art - art is a source of great pleasure in life. Personally, I'm actively involved in creating art (mostly music and poetry) as a value to be experienced in the world. Even for those who are not active as producers of art, I think the highest experience and greatest enjoyment of art come from discussing it with others, thinking about it, reflecting on it, selectively attending to what one likes and does not, seeking out art one might enjoy, etc. Here again, the value of art can be measured along the dimensions of conceptualization, self-direction, achievement, and enjoyment.

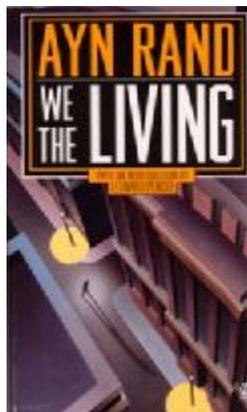
These are only three examples, but I think you probably get the idea: these four cardinal values yield a framework for understanding the more particular values. But do these cardinal values yield a comprehensive account of human value? I think they do, at a cer-

tain level of abstraction. They are 'abstract assessments', conceptualizations that do justice to or allow room for the more particular values of human existence; because of this, the cardinal values provide dimensions along which the more particular values can be measured. And I think this is the most we can expect from a system of cardinal values.

Regarding what I call the more particular values, Ayn Rand is famous for having made specific prescriptions as to what is right or wrong, good or bad. Partly this is because she was a novelist and needed to present characters who had specific measurements along the dimensions I've discussed. Unfortunately, one can conclude from Rand's novels that her characters provide the only consistent set of measurements along those dimensions - or, further, that some of the more specific (non-core) dimensions along which Rand measured her characters (e.g., their near-ascetic dedication to work or their unusual disinterest in family) are the only or the most important dimensions of value in life. I think that these conclusions are misguided and concrete-bound, and that a focus on cardinal values can result in a more balanced, healthy, and conceptual perspective on the particular values of everyday life. The key is to see cardinal values as a bridge between abstract "Life" and particular living - as categories of thought and dimensions of measurement, not as distant symbols or ends in themselves. It is this conceptual approach to values that I see as part of the enduring value of Objectivism.

Joy and Reason and Meaning

For me, the essence of what is good in Rand's philosophy is best captured by the phrase "joy and reason and meaning", which she uses in her description of Howard Roark's Monadnock Valley development at the beginning of part four of *The Fountainhead*. However, my understanding of this phrase is broader than Rand's. Here is how I unpack it...



One could interpret joy as requiring a seriously heroic sense of life, as when Rand says of Kira in *We the Living* that "because she worshipped joy, Kira seldom laughed" (42). For me, joy is the word that best captures the kind of positive, constructive, humanistic approach to life, art, and the pursuit of wisdom that I try to apply in my life - an attitude that life is special and precious and meant to be enjoyed. However, holding joy as an ideal and focusing on the positive aspects of life does not imply that one refuses to acknowledge painful facts or experiences, in the sense of Nietzsche's early claim that purely Apollonian art is

sentimental escapism. So while I value acts and creations that are pleasing to the senses and to the mind, I recognize that the capacity for joy is but the most positive realization of the capacity for feeling and emotion, and that one must nurture that more fundamental capacity in order to be capable of the greatest joy. The acts and creations that I value exhibit an openness to the emotional experience of life; at its best, that experience is positive, but being open to experience means not shrinking from the negative, either.

One could interpret reason as requiring an explicitly philosophical view of man and the universe as well as a state of “full focus” and willingness to judge others at all times. For me, reason means that an act or creation is clear, intelligible, integrated, open to the fundamental human power of understanding ourselves and the world. Although as linguistic beings humans are fundamentally conceptual, the power of understanding includes perception, imagination, and introspection as well as conceptual thought. As Jacob Bronowski wrote in his poem *The Abacus and the Rose*, we must “reject the feud of eye and intellect”; reason’s hand, far from being cold and clammy, provides the touch that enables both light and heat, both thought and passion, both deep understanding and deep emotion. Joy and reason go hand in hand.

What, then, of meaning? One could interpret meaning as requiring a kind of excessive seriousness about life, and as being found only in the loftiest abstractions or most cosmic goals. For me, meaning is a combination of the human powers of choice and action: one finds meaning in the self-directed achievement of that which one has affirmed as good or important. But the good and the important are not mere abstractions: they may be as particular as the smile of a friend, the scent of a flower, the sense of a phrase. Individualism extends that far; and meaning is found not merely in the cosmic and the universal, but also most directly in the concrete, the particular, and the deeply personal.

Living Your Own Life

Together, joy and reason and meaning capture the essence of a philosophy for living on earth - not academic distinctions and hopeless abstractions, but a fully-engaged life of clear understanding, passionate valuation, active achievement, earthy enjoyment, and wise reflection. It is just such a humanistic philosophy that I see as the highest potential of the philosophy of Ayn Rand. Can one ask for more meaning than that?

Some claim that one can. Some assert that the true meaning of life is not to be found in personal fulfillment, but through submersion into a movement that is greater than any one individual. Paradoxically, such claims are made even in a philosophy of individualism.

Ayn Rand once said that she was doing more than dying for Objectivism: she was living for it. Maybe, just maybe, this was appropriate for Rand herself, because she originated this line of thinking. But no idea, no philosophy, is an end in itself. Only your life is an end in itself. Your life belongs to you, not to Objectivism or any other philosophy.

At the end of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein wrote:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them - as steps - to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

Any philosophy is just such a ladder. Once one is able to see the world aright and with one’s own eyes, it is time to let go of the ladder. I myself have let go of Rand’s ladder, and no longer consider myself an Objectivist. Instead, I see myself as a student of life, as someone who, among other things, thinks clearly and honestly, honors the self and others, creates value, understands as much as possible about this world of ours (including the human world), and enjoys his brief sojourn on this earth. My thinking was for a long time deeply influenced by Ayn Rand. But over time I find myself thinking much more freely, venturing farther and farther afield from my Randian roots, seeking truths in traditions as diverse as Taoism, Epicureanism, and gnosticism. And even aside from my thinking, I find myself simply living, enjoying my existence, working to create value in the world. I no longer see these activities through Rand-colored glasses - I simply do them, and try to do them well.

The true meaning of Rand’s individualism is not to identify myself with the label of Objectivist, or with any other label for that matter. It is not to perceive myself as fighting any cultural or philosophical wars - it is to live my own life. Labels are important if you need to keep track of which battalion you’re in: you need a banner to march under, colors to fly, a distinctive phrase on the battle horn to inspire you. But I’m not fighting any wars, running any races, or supporting any movements. I am living my own life - and I find it eminently more worth my precious time to live and create than to argue and fight.

True believers say that this is treason to the philosophy of Ayn Rand. But, paraphrasing Rand’s paraphrase of Patrick Henry, I say: If this be treason, make the most of it.