The Ethics of Objectivism

You cannot claim values if you do not value the valuer. . . . To value anything other than your own life as a primary is a contradiction in terms.

Interviewer: You uphold an ethics of egoism. The term “selfishness” creates a mental block and evokes feelings of guilt in most people. They can’t understand, for example, how personal relationships could exist under your ethics. Do you think that love or friendship should be unselfish?

AR: Friendship and love, particularly romantic love, are the most selfish relationships possible. But I have to elaborate. People do get blinded with guilt when they hear the word “selfishness.” This is one of the cultural charges that I bring against the doctrine of altruism. It has convinced men that if they do not want to sacrifice themselves to others, the only alternative is to be some kind of Attila and to sacrifice others to themselves.

The first thing a man would have to do in considering the Objectivist ethics is to define his terms fully and precisely, and to put aside any emotions, particularly guilt, until he understands what he is dealing with. Then he may examine his feelings, but his feelings are not tools of cognition. He will certainly never understand the Objectivist ethics, or any ethics, by means of guilt. An emotion of guilt is the most destructive to a man’s mind. A guilty man is barely capable of thinking. Guilt is certainly one emotion that should be put aside when one wants to consider an ethical system. Any guilt he may feel is the product of altruism and of the doctrine of original sin—the view that man is depraved by nature, and so should embrace the role of sacrificial animal.
Since no man with any remnant of self-esteem would welcome the role of sacrificial animal, guilt is perpetuated in him. He knows very well that he does not, and should not, want to be a victim, and therefore he is blinded with guilt over his selfishness, which is in fact the best part of him: his self-esteem.

Now let me define “selfishness” as Objectivism sees it. After establishing man’s life as the standard of morality, the Objectivist ethics begins by saying that since man can survive only by his own efforts and since his capacity to value is a condition of his nature as a living being, he can live only for his own sake. He can live only by taking himself as his highest value, as the goal of all his efforts. Why? Because that is where his valuing capacity comes from. To claim that you value service to others as a primary, above your own interests, is a logical contradiction. You cannot claim values if you do not value the value. If you attach no importance to yourself and your own judgment, you have denied the base from which your capacity to value comes. To value anything other than your own life as a primary is a contradiction in terms.

The next step is to determine what is to be done with that primary. How do you implement it? What does it mean to live only for your own sake? The basic choice you need to make is to live by means of your own rational judgment and to be guided by nothing but reason. But above that basic level, the next choice you have to make is a choice of values. What kind of things do you consider valuable by a rational standard, and how do you want to pursue them?

One of the highest values to a man of reason and self-esteem is other human beings. Of any category in the universe, human beings are of greatest interest to him. It is only a man with an inferiority complex who despises mankind. Someone of self-esteem certainly values man, since he values himself. I don’t mean that he loves his neighbor as himself, but that he attaches enormous value to man as a phenomenon. And the kind of man he deals with makes a great difference to his life. If he deals with nothing but morons, scoundrels, cowards and fools, there can be no pleasure and no advantage in it. Such men are only dangers or burdens to him, providing him with nothing but cause for contempt and boredom. On the other hand, if he can deal with men of ability, of moral character, of stature—if he can see in other men that which he values, if he can see in them the virtues he creates in himself—then there is a selfish gain to him, on several counts. On the practical level, it is to his advantage to deal with other independent, productive, intelligent men. On the so-called personal level, it is to his advantage to deal with men he can respect and admire.

If you believe that friendship or love has to be unselfish, it simply means that you do not care about people at all. It means that it makes no difference to you whether your friend is good or bad, whether he has virtues or noth-
I challenge the idea that following blind whims and emotional, causeless preferences is to your self-interest. No one could ever validate that as a moral principle.