

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 *valuer*. 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-

ing but flaws—that you are his friend only for what *he* can derive from the relationship, while you derive nothing, neither material nor spiritual. This is the most man-hating, most un-humanitarian view of human relationships possible. No one would care to be your friend if you literally told him, "I don't give a damn about you. It gives me no personal happiness to know that you are good or bad, happy or miserable, but I am very concerned only for your own sake."

It is in this sense that friendship, and particularly love, must be the expression of your most profoundly selfish values. It has to be the expression of the following premise: Men of virtue, men who represent your own standards, are valuable to you, and you enjoy them in the form of *personal*, not merely functional, relationships. By "functional," I mean involving a business exchange, as is the case with, say, your grocery clerk. All you expect from him is that he do his job honestly. You are not concerned about his person, beyond a general respect you grant to any human being—unless he has proved himself to be too evil to deserve even that. You do not expect a personal relationship; you merely have a functional relationship involving a certain exchange of services or goods. In personal relationships, however, it is the value of the person as such that is of selfish interest to you. If you don't value the person in this way, you cannot be a friend, nor can you be in love.

Interviewer: What would you say to the so-called egoists who equate selfishness with cheating and lying to get whatever they desire?

AR: Egoism does not mean subjectivism, or what I call whim-worship. It does not mean that man has the right to take his whims as his standard of value. It does not mean that anything he desires to do is right just because he desires it. The subjectivist, or hedonist, approach to morality is precisely what Objectivism rejects. A man has the right to live for his own sake, but since a certain kind of policy is required for him to live, he must hold the right values. He cannot choose his values at whim—or rather, he can, but he will perish for doing so. Whim-worship is evil morally and impractical in action. A man has to choose his values by reason. When a man decides that a certain course of action is right, he has to be able to justify such action rationally—not simply by declaring, "Well, it's I who have chosen it."

Interviewer: Perhaps the word "egoism" itself is an unfortunate one, and should be abandoned, because of its historical associations.

AR: No, I want to redeem that word from the improper package-deal to which it's been subjected. If egoism means "acting for your own interest,"

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.