

4. The “Conflicts” of Men’s interests

by Ayn Rand

Some students of Objectivism find it difficult to grasp the Objectivist principle that “there are no conflicts of interests among rational men.”

A typical question runs as follows: “Suppose two men apply for the same job. Only one of them can be hired. Isn’t this an instance of a conflict of interests, and isn’t the benefit of one man achieved at the price of the sacrifice of the other?”

There are four interrelated considerations which are involved in a rational man’s view of his interests, but which are ignored or evaded in the above question and in all similar approaches to the issue. I shall designate these four as: (a) “Reality,” (b) “Context,” (c) “Responsibility,” (d) “Effort.”

(a) *Reality*. The term “interests” is a wide abstraction that covers the entire field of ethics. It includes the issues of: man’s values, his desires, his goals and their actual achievement in reality. A man’s “interests” depend on the kind of goals he chooses to pursue, his choice of goals depends on his desires, his desires depend on his values—and, for a rational man, his values depend on the judgment of his mind.

Desires (or feelings or emotions or wishes or whims) are not tools of cognition; they are not a valid standard of value, nor a valid criterion of man’s interests. The mere fact that a man desires something does not constitute a proof that the object of his desire is *good*, nor that its achievement is actually to his interest.

To claim that a man’s interests are sacrificed whenever a desire of his is frustrated—is to hold a subjectivist view of man’s values and interests. Which means: to believe that it is proper, moral and possible for man to achieve his goals, regardless of whether they contradict the facts of reality or not. Which means: to hold an irrational or mystical view of existence. Which means: to deserve no further consideration.

In choosing his goals (the specific values he seeks to gain and/or keep), a rational man is guided by his thinking (by a process of reason)—not by his feelings or desires. He does not regard desires as irreducible primaries, as the given, which he is destined irresistibly to pursue. He does not regard “because I *want* it” or “because I *feel* like it” as a sufficient cause and validation of his actions. He chooses and/or identifies his desires by a process of reason, and he does not act to achieve a desire until and unless he is able rationally to validate it *in the full context of his knowledge* and of his

other values and goals. He does not act until he is able to say: “I want it because it is *right*.”

The Law of Identity (A is A) is a rational man’s paramount consideration in the process of determining his interests. He knows that the contradictory is the impossible, that a contradiction cannot be achieved in reality and that the attempt to achieve it can lead only to disaster and destruction. Therefore, he does not permit himself to hold contradictory values, to pursue contradictory goals, or to imagine that the pursuit of a contradiction can ever be to his interest.

Only an irrationalist (or mystic or subjectivist—in which category I place all those who regard faith, feelings or desires as man’s standard of value) exists in a perpetual conflict of “interests.” Not only do his alleged interests clash with those of other men, but they clash also with one another.

No one finds it difficult to dismiss from philosophical consideration the problem of a man who wails that life entraps him in an irreconcilable conflict because he cannot eat his cake and have it, too. That problem does not acquire intellectual validity by being expanded to involve more than cake—whether one expands it to the whole universe, as in the doctrines of Existentialism, or only to a few random whims and evasions, as in most people’s views of their interests.

When a person reaches the stage of claiming that *man’s interests conflict with reality*, the concept “interests” ceases to be meaningful—and his problem ceases to be philosophical and becomes psychological.

(b) *Context*. Just as a rational man does not hold any conviction out of context—that is: without relating it to the rest of his knowledge and resolving any possible contradictions—so he does not hold or pursue any desire out of context. And he does not judge what is or is not to his interest out of context, on the range of any given moment.

Context-dropping is one of the chief psychological tools of evasion. In regard to one’s desires, there are two major ways of context-dropping: the issues of *range* and of *means*.

A rational man sees his interests in terms of a lifetime and selects his goals accordingly. This does not mean that he has to be omniscient, infallible or clairvoyant. It means that he does not live his life short-range and does not drift like a bum pushed by the spur of the moment. It means that he does not regard any moment as cut off from the context of the rest of his life, and that he allows no conflicts or contradictions between his short-range and long-range interests. He does not become his own destroyer by pursuing a desire today which wipes out all his values tomorrow.

A rational man does not indulge in wistful longings for ends divorced from means. He does not hold a desire without knowing (or learning) and considering the means by which it is to be achieved. Since he knows that nature does not provide man with the automatic satisfaction of his desires, that a man's goals or values have to be achieved by his own effort, that the lives and efforts of other men are not his property and are not there to serve his wishes—a rational man never holds a desire or pursues a goal which cannot be achieved directly or *indirectly* by his own effort.

It is with a proper understanding of this “*indirectly*” that the crucial social issue begins.

Living in a society, instead of on a desert island, does not relieve a man of the responsibility of supporting his own life. The only difference is that he supports his life by *trading* his products or services for the products or services of others. And, in this process of trade, a rational man does not seek or desire any more or any less than his own effort can earn. What determines his earnings? The free market, that is: the voluntary choice and judgment of the men who are willing to trade him their effort in return.

When a man trades with others, he is counting—explicitly or implicitly—on their rationality, that is: on their ability to recognize the objective value of his work. (A trade based on any other premise is a con game or a fraud.) Thus, when a rational man pursues a goal in a free society, he does not place himself at the mercy of whims, the favors or the prejudices of others; he depends on nothing but his own effort: *directly*, by doing objectively valuable work—*indirectly*, through the objective evaluation of his work by others.

It is in this sense that a rational man never holds a desire or pursues a goal which cannot be achieved by his own effort. He trades value for value. He never seeks or desires the *unearned*. If he undertakes to achieve a goal that requires the cooperation of many people, he never counts on anything but his own ability to persuade them and their voluntary agreement.

Needless to say, a rational man never distorts or corrupts his own standards and judgment in order to appeal to the irrationality, stupidity or dishonesty of others. He knows that such a course is suicidal. He knows that one's only practical chance to achieve any degree of success or anything humanly desirable lies in dealing with those who are rational, whether there are many of them or few. If, in any given set of circumstances, any victory is possible at all, it is only reason that can win it. And, in a free society, no matter how hard the struggle might be, it is reason that ultimately wins.

Since he never drops the context of the issues he deals with, a rational man accepts that struggle as *to his interest*—because he knows that freedom

is to his interest. He knows that the struggle to achieve his values includes the possibility of defeat. He knows also that there is no alternative and no automatic guarantee of success for man's effort, neither in dealing with nature nor with other men. So he does not judge his interests by any particular defeat nor by the range of any particular moment. He lives and judges long-range. And he assumes the full responsibility of knowing what conditions *are necessary* for the achievement of his goals.

(c) *Responsibility*. This last is the particular form of intellectual responsibility that most people evade. That evasion is the major cause of their frustrations and defeats.

Most people hold their desires without any context whatever, as ends hanging in a foggy vacuum, the fog hiding any concept of means. They rouse themselves mentally only long enough to utter an "*I wish*," and stop there, and wait, as if the rest were up to some unknown power.

What they evade is *the responsibility of judging the social world*. They take the world as the given. "A world I never made" is the deepest essence of their attitude—and they seek only to adjust themselves uncritically to the incomprehensible requirements of those unknowable others who did make the world, whoever those might be.

But humility and presumptuousness are two sides of the same psychological medal. In the willingness to throw oneself blindly on the mercy of others there is the implicit privilege of making blind demands on one's masters.

There are countless ways in which this sort of "metaphysical humility" reveals itself. For instance, there is the man who wishes to be rich, but never thinks of discovering what means, actions and conditions are required to achieve wealth. Who is he to judge? He never made the world—and "nobody gave him a break."

There is the girl who wishes to be loved, but never thinks of discovering what love is, what values it requires, and whether she possesses any virtues to be loved for. Who is she to judge? Love, she feels, is an inexplicable favor—so she merely longs for it, feeling that somebody has deprived her of her share in the distribution of favors.

There are the parents who suffer deeply and genuinely, because their son (or daughter) does not love them, and who, simultaneously, ignore, oppose or attempt to destroy everything they know of their son's convictions, values and goals, never thinking of the connection between these two facts, never making an attempt to understand their son. The world they never made and dare not challenge, has told them that children love parents automatically.

There is the man who wants a job, but never thinks of discovering what qualifications the job requires or what constitutes doing one's work well. Who is he to judge? He never made the world. Somebody owes him a living. How? *Somehow*.

A European architect of my acquaintance was talking, one day, of his trip to Puerto Rico. He described—with great indignation at the universe at large—the squalor of the Puerto Ricans' living conditions. Then he described what wonders modern housing could do for them, which he had daydreamed in detail, including electric refrigerators and tiled bathrooms. I asked: "Who would pay for it?" He answered, in a faintly offended, almost huffy tone of voice: "Oh, that's not for me to worry about! An architect's task is only to project what *should* be done. Let somebody else think about the money."

That is the psychology from which all "social reforms" or "welfare states" or "noble experiments" or the destruction of the world have come.

In dropping the responsibility for one's own interests and life, one drops the responsibility of ever having to consider the interests and lives of others—of those others who are, somehow, to provide the satisfaction of one's desires.

Whoever allows a "somehow" into his view of the means by which his desires are to be achieved, is guilty of that "metaphysical humility" which, psychologically, is the premise of a parasite. As Nathaniel Branden pointed out in a lecture, "*somehow*" always means "*somebody*."

(d) *Effort*. Since a rational man knows that man must achieve his goals by his own effort, he knows that neither wealth nor jobs nor any human values exist in a given, limited, static quantity, waiting to be divided. He knows that all benefits have to be produced, that the gain of one man does not represent the loss of another, that a man's achievement is not earned at the expense of those who have not achieved it.

Therefore, he never imagines that he has any sort of unearned, unilateral claim on any human being—and he never leaves his interests at the mercy of any one person or single, specific concrete. He may need clients, but not any one particular customer—he may need a job, but not any one particular job.

If he encounters competition, he either meets it or chooses another line of work. There is no job so slow that a better, more skillful performance of it would pass unnoticed and unappreciated; not in a *free* society. Ask any office manager.

It is only the passive, parasitical representatives of the "humility metaphysics" school who regard any competitor as a threat, because the thought of earning one's position by personal merit is not part of their view

of life. They regard themselves as interchangeable mediocrities who have nothing to offer and who fight, in a “static” universe, for someone’s causeless favor.

A rational man knows that one does not live by means of “luck,” “breaks” or favors, that there is no such thing as an “only chance” or a single opportunity, and that this is guaranteed precisely by the existence of competition. He does not regard any concrete, specific goal or value as irreplaceable. He knows that only persons are irreplaceable—only those one loves.

He knows also that there are no conflicts of interests among rational men even in the issue of love. Like any other value, love is not a static quantity to be divided, but an unlimited response to be earned. The love for one friend is not a threat to the love for another, and neither is the love for the various members of one’s family, assuming they have earned it. The most exclusive form—romantic love—is not an issue of competition. If two men are in love with the same woman, what she feels for either of them is not determined by what she feels for the other and is not taken away from him. If she chooses one of them, the “loser” could not have had what the “winner” has earned.

It is only among the irrational, emotion-motivated persons, whose love is divorced from any standards of value, that chance rivalries, accidental conflicts and blind choices prevail. But then, whoever wins does not win much. Among the emotion-driven, neither love nor any other emotion has any meaning.

Such, in brief essence, are the four major considerations involved in a rational man’s view of his interests.

Now let us return to the question originally asked—about the two men applying for the same job—and observe in what manner it ignores or opposes these four considerations.

(a) *Reality*. The mere fact that two men desire the same job does not constitute proof that either of them is entitled to it or deserves it, and that his interests are damaged if he does not obtain it.

(b) *Context*. Both men should know that if they desire a job, their goal is made possible only by the existence of a business concern able to provide employment—that that business concern requires the availability of more than one applicant for any job—that if only one applicant existed, he would not obtain the job, because the business concern would have to close its doors—and that their competition for the job is to *their* interest, even though one of them will lose in that particular encounter.

(c) *Responsibility*. Neither man has the moral right to declare that he doesn’t want to consider all those things, he just wants a job. He is not

entitled to any desire or to any “interest” without knowledge of what is required to make its fulfillment possible.

(d) *Effort*. Whoever gets the job, has earned it (assuming that the employer’s choice is rational). This benefit is due to his own merit—not to the “sacrifice” of the other man who never had any vested right to that job. The failure to give to a man what had never belonged to him can hardly be described as “sacrificing his interests.”

All of the above discussion applies only to the relationships among rational men and only to a free society. In a free society, one does not have to deal with those who are irrational. One is free to avoid them.

In a nonfree society, no pursuit of any interests is possible to anyone; nothing is possible but gradual and general destruction.

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