

A Dialogue on Ayn Rand's Ethics

Rejoinder to Chris Cathcart, "Egoism and Rights" and Robert L. Campbell, "Altruism in Auguste Comte and Ayn Rand" (Spring 2006)

Defending the Argument

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Introduction

I would like to thank Robert L. Campbell (2006) and Chris Cathcart (2006) for their thoughtful responses to my article. As will become evident, I am unconvinced that either has uncovered major weaknesses, but I am grateful for the opportunity to reply and clarify matters that may remain at issue between us. I have certainly learned from them both.

Campbell

Robert L. Campbell focuses upon my rejection of Ayn Rand's "argument that altruism in morality is inconsistent with respect for individual rights in politics" (Campbell 2006, 357). I find his response a bit puzzling, but I will try to sort it out.

Before doing so, however, I must take issue with Campbell's remark about my "insensitivity to the ancient ethical tradition to which Rand's moral theory largely belongs" (357). I assume he means the ancient ethical tradition of eudaemonism, shared in different ways by Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and a multitude of other thinkers. Much of my own work has been within that tradition (see, for example, Bass 2004), so I hope the insensitivity is only alleged. Since he offers no specific evidence, it is difficult to know how to respond. I suspect he may diagnose insensitivity on the basis of what he supposes to be insufficient respect for Rand. If so, I would say the attitude to Rand is not the product of lack of sensitivity, but rather, in part, a matter of

sensitivity to some of the tradition's insights that Rand should have absorbed, but did not. In particular, from Aristotle, she might have learned a more subtle and nuanced moral psychology, and a better, and less instrumental, understanding of the virtues.¹

Turning to the main body of Campbell's reply, I find it puzzling that he chose to focus upon such a small portion of my article, only about ten percent of the total, and further, that his focus is not upon a section in which any of my central arguments were developed. So far as I can see, Campbell could be correct on every point of his criticism without seriously damaging my main theses, which have to do with the incompatibility of egoism and rights.

Campbell's objections to my treatment of Rand's argument about altruism and individual rights seem to be threefold. First, I should have addressed Comte, who coined the term, "altruism," and characterized it in the same way that Rand did. She was "true to the intentions of the founder" (367). Second, he expresses dissatisfaction with the usage I prefer, the ordinary or garden-variety sense,² according to which altruism means "that the interests of others matter in their own right, apart from the way they might impact upon one's own interests, and therefore that . . . it could be appropriate, desirable or morally required, on some occasions to act on behalf of others, even at some cost to one's own interests" (Bass 2006, 331). He thinks my usage represents "a wide and smeary range of views," which is "watered down" from Comte's "crisp and uncompromising" formulation (Campbell 2006, 362). Third, he demands an accounting for insistence upon the "smeary" meaning, when the term "is still quite capable of bearing a Comtean meaning" (367).

With regard to the first point, I overlooked the fact that Rand had correctly cited Comte's use of "altruism" in just the sense she gives the term. I had said that "[i]t is a doctrine that has never been held . . . by any of the thinkers she castigated as espousers of altruism" (Bass 2006, 331). Campbell corrects me by pointing out that Rand had not neglected to castigate Comte. So, what I should have said is that it is a doctrine that has been held by *hardly* any of the thinkers she castigated as espousers of altruism.

That may sound flippant, but I really think it is sufficient. What

Rand condemns as altruism is still not a doctrine held by most of the people she calls altruists.

On the second point, Campbell provides interesting intellectual history as to how altruism came to be associated with doctrines and practices much less sharply defined than Comte's conception, and, though I have reservations about a point or two, I appreciate his scholarship. However, I do not think the process is so much a matter of the unjustified watering down of a term as of taking a term that was nearly useless, for lack of application, and pressing it into service to apply to a range of real positions. The so-called "smeary range of views" is at least a range of views that are actually held. Plainly, for example, the altruists typically criticized by Rand—thinkers such as Kant, Marx, Mill, Spencer, Dewey and Rawls—are people who hold some position or other in the wide and smeary range, while only one, Comte himself, actually holds the Comtean position. This suggests that Rand's own usage was ambiguous: When offering definitions, she gives the Comtean formulation; when offering examples, she cites thinkers to whom the Comtean formulation does not apply.

On the third point, there might be some reason for making "altruism" bear the Comtean meaning, but apart from the fact that the term *could* bear that meaning, I do not see that Campbell has given us any reason that it should. Perhaps if one had some doctrine about the proprietary rights of coiners of terms, one would be reluctant to use a term differently than its coiner intended, but it is hard to imagine what would warrant that doctrine. Another possibility is that there is an argument that all the more moderate views in the "smeary range" logically collapse into the immoderate Comtean view, so that any step away from egoism leaves one without the intellectual or moral resources to resist demands for all-consuming sacrifice for others. Some thinkers friendly to Rand may suppose this, but I have never seen a serious attempt to explain why we should accept the rather remarkable conclusion that if the interests of others matter at all,³ then one's own interests have no importance whatsoever. If that is Campbell's view, it would be nice to see the argument. In its absence, we are well-justified in employing "altruism" for the wide and smeary range that includes actual positions rather than narrowing down our

meaning to a crisp and uncompromising formulation that applies to hardly anything.⁴

Cathcart

Chris Cathcart addresses some of the central issues connected to my argument in “Egoism versus Rights,” and for the opportunity to clarify and amplify my position, I am grateful. Assessing his remarks is complicated somewhat by the fact that our disagreement depends partly upon his fusion of interpretive and substantive concerns. My main interest is in the substantive issues, but they cannot be adequately considered in the form in which he presents them, in complete abstraction from the interpretive matters.

This interpenetration can be illustrated with Cathcart’s first point. According to my equal-interests argument—the Argument, as I call it, in which an agent must select either the rights-violating or the rights-respecting option from a pair that are equally good in terms of the agent’s interests—there is a contradiction in the position of the rights-respecting egoist. The rights-respecting option must be judged to be both morally better and not morally better than the rights-violating option. Cathcart observes that this does not “resemble an agent deliberating as heroes do from any of Rand’s novels” (2006, 352), and suggests that this indicates a misunderstanding, on my part, of Rand’s egoism. My interpretation is different. First, the Argument was meant to show an inconsistency in the *theory* of rights-respecting egoism, not necessarily to portray a course of deliberation, so the deliberations of Rand’s heroes are only tangentially relevant. Second, he apparently takes it for granted that Rand’s fictional heroes are really egoists who respect rights, and draws the conclusion that if the Argument indicates otherwise, that betrays a misunderstanding of egoism. My inclination is the reverse: if Rand’s heroes can be counted upon to respect rights in equal-interests situations, then they are not really egoists. The fact that Rand *meant* her heroes to be exemplars of rights-respecting egoism carries little weight.

Interpretive questions figure also in the main points of Cathcart’s reply. The first is that “Rand’s egoism is not consequentialist”

(Cathcart 2006, 352). The relevance is clear enough, since I do take her egoism to be consequentialist, at least to the extent of having “the feature that rights are conceived solely as means to some further good” (Bass 2006, 339). Since I doubt the hermeneutic questions can be resolved here, I shall briefly explain my interpretation, without hoping to settle the matter, and then explain why it makes little difference to the real issues.

Rand certainly made claims that *appear* consequentialist. For example, she says that “[r]eality confronts man with a great many ‘musts,’ but all of them are conditional; the formula of realistic necessity is: ‘You must, if—’ and the ‘if’ stands for man’s choice: ‘—if you want to achieve a certain goal’” (1982, 118–19). That appears to say that there are no “musts,” and therefore no moral “musts,” independent of some goal to be pursued. Elsewhere, she makes it clear that she thinks that the only thing fundamentally suited to be a goal by which to direct oneself is staying alive, a reading confirmed in secondary sources. Leonard Peikoff (1991) writes that “morality is a means to survival” (339), and “man needs [morality] for one reason only . . . in order to survive” (214). Further, “remaining alive is the *goal* of values and of all proper action” (213; emphasis in original).

More could be cited along these lines, but it must be admitted that many passages may seem to bear a contrary interpretation. I think the weight of evidence favors the consequentialists (and survivalists), but I do not expect to make that case here at a length or depth sufficient to lay all doubt to rest. In an important sense, though, the interpretive issues do not much matter. What is central to my Argument is the attempt to show that egoism and rights are incompatible. Whether *Rand’s theory* and rights are compatible is a distinct, and, for my purposes, much less important, question. This is crucial, because I do not take it for granted that Rand’s theory is a form of egoism, especially if, as Cathcart supposes, it is a non-consequentialist, moralized-interest theory.

Thus, my view is that whether or not Cathcart is correct about the first two points of his reply—that Rand’s ethics is not consequentialist and that it expresses a moralized-interest theory—he is mistaken to think that non-consequentialist or moralized-interest theories can be

forms of *egoism*, and therefore mistaken about the second two points: There is no sound reason for calling Rand's theory, if it is really a non-consequentialist, moralized-interest theory, a form of egoism, nor does any unitary moral principle find expression in both egoism and rights. The important issues turn not upon the interpretation of Rand but upon the questions of whether a non-consequentialist or moralized-interest theory can be a form of egoism, since Cathcart (2006, 352–53) thinks that “[t]he Argument shows the incompatibility between all consequentialist theories . . . and rights.”⁵

There seem to be three distinguishable strands to Cathcart's case that egoism need not be consequentialist. One stems from the briefly cited article, “Deontological Egoism,” by Keith Burgess-Jackson (2003). However, that attempt to show that there is conceptual space for a non-consequentialist egoism fails since, in Burgess-Jackson's favored version, an act may be wrong, even when it is known that doing it would be best for one's interests.⁶

A second strand consists of hints and remarks made in passing to the effect that Rand's theory does not sound like a consequentialist theory. The remarks seem innocent of the fact that there are sophisticated as well as unsophisticated forms of consequentialism. At most, what is shown is that Rand was not an unsophisticated consequentialist. It is not shown that she was not a sophisticated consequentialist,⁷ and therefore, not shown that she or other egoists have some non-consequentialist loophole through which to escape the force of the Argument.

A third strand appears in Cathcart's objection to my insistence that egoist theories be framed in terms of non-moralized interests, which do not presuppose moral concepts or preconditions for their identification. As I understand it, the appeal to moralized interests in characterizing Rand's theory is meant to be a reason for denying that her theory is consequentialist rather than an independent reason for supposing it to be immune to the Argument. If so, there may be a confusion, for it is not obvious that interests cannot be *both* moralized *and* just a matter of promoting a favored consequence. Then, the problem of reconciling consequentialism and rights would remain in full force, even with a moralized-interest theory.⁸ Be that as it may,

I am happy to have the opportunity to explain further why egoists should not resort to moralized-interest theories.

My concern is not that there is something objectionable about allowing moral conditions to enter into the identification of interests, nor is it even, fundamentally, over whether Rand offers us a moralized-interest theory, though I believe that is not what she meant to do. Rather, the problem is that the appeal to moralized interests trivializes egoism. If interests cannot be identified independently of moral conditions, egoism has been tacitly abandoned.

To see this point, consider a theorist who has a completely free hand in specifying the content of interests. Let us call her view a *promiscuous* theory of interests. There will, of course, be no problem if she says that any degree of respect for rights can be squared with action that is in the interests of the agent. For example, she can simply hold that respect for rights is a highest-order interest, more self-interestedly important than anything that might come into conflict with it. The reason she can do that is that any claim whatsoever can be squared with acting in one's interests for a promiscuous theory. Knowingly and deliberately going to one's own ruin to prevent a cabbage from being eaten could count as being in one's interests if the theory need only *say* that ruin for the sake of cabbage-saving is in one's interests. No version of egoism can be so permissive about the content of interests.

Restrictions must be imposed somehow, but whence are the restrictions to come? The short answer is that we will need a more restrictive theory of self-interest. The first step is uncontroversial. Suppose an agent is faced with a pair of options. Why is one of them, or neither, more in her interests? The answer has to be something like this: The theory of self-interest must, on one hand, identify a class of basic or core interests, and on the other, must say that other things count as being in an agent's interests by virtue of standing in the right relation to the basic or core interests. Actions are favored or not by virtue of their relation to the core interests. Let us call the specification of basic or core interests a *List*.

Now, why do items on the List count as being in the agent's interests? Plainly, it will not do to say that they are in the agent's

interests because they stand in the right relation to items on the List. We may be able to rule out an interest in cabbage-saving at the cost of slow death by torture because it doesn't stand in the right relation to items on the List if we have something *else* there, but how are we to rule out cabbage-saving (even at high cost) as *itself* an item on the List? That is, how are we to avoid a promiscuous theory? The theory stands in need of further articulation. Without further constraint, the structure in which there is a List of basic concerns and in which other things are recommended (or not) in terms of their relation to the basic concerns might amount to a theory of value, but not to a theory of self-interest.

What is needed is some reason, other than a relation to further interests, to classify items on the List as self-interested. The only workable possibility I know is to apply the *test of immediate plausibility*: For any item on the List, it must be immediately plausible that it is in the interests of the agent. Credible candidates include longevity, happiness, pleasure, health, wealth, exemption from pain or suffering and the like. Why must List items pass the test of immediate plausibility? Consider the alternative. Suppose there is something that belongs on the List that it is not immediately plausible to regard as being in the agent's interests. Then, some case will have to be presented as to why it counts as being in the agent's interests. How will that argument proceed except by linking it to something that *is* immediately plausible to regard as being in the interests of the agent? But then, if its self-interested character must be validated by affecting a linkage to immediately plausible objects of interest, the new item will not be needed on the List of *basic* interests, after all.

Now, I think we can see what the moralized-interest theorist is trying to do. He is trying to propose items for the List of basic interests, while denying that they must pass the test of immediate plausibility. If all interests must pass the test of immediate plausibility or be explained in terms of something that does, then we will not have a moralized-interest theory. On the other hand, he must avoid the trivialization involved in a promiscuous theory of interests or in the conversion of the theory of self-interest to a theory of value. The moralized-interest theorist needs a further constraint that cannot, *ex*

hypothesi, be derived from immediately plausible objects of interest. I submit that the search is hopeless. Consider what Cathcart (2006, 354) offers in trying to spell out the theory:

Man's proper self-interest isn't defined in a vacuum, as a primary, but by reference to the requirements of the life of a rational, conceptual being. The basic standard by which to judge one's actions is whether it accords with one's life as a rational being. The chief virtue by which to live, the virtue that entails the other virtues and both expresses (or constitutes) one's life as a rational being as well as leads to successful living and achievement of values, is the virtue of rationality. One is acting according to one's proper self-interest when one is exercising the virtue of rationality in pursuit of successful human living.

Of course, Cathcart is right that self-interest is not to be defined in a vacuum, but the question remains what kind of non-vacuum it is to be defined in. Are rationality and successful living themselves to be understood as being self-interested or not? Whether rationality is self-interested is a matter of what rationality requires, and whether successful living is self-interested is a matter of what we should be successful at doing. The moralized-interest theorist cannot be allowed, without argument, the premise that the supposed moralized interests to which he appeals are really matters of self-interest. And without that premise, his credentials as an egoist are in disarray.

Moralized interests are no help to the theorist who wishes to maintain the compatibility of egoism and rights, for in moralizing them, we sever the connections that can provide assurance that we are still speaking of interests.

Thus, in conclusion, neither non-consequentialism nor moralized interests confer any immunity from the Argument. The most that they might do is suffice to show that a given theory, such as Rand's, is not really a form of egoism.

Notes

1. For some discussion of the way in which the Epicureans, alone among the ancient eudaemonists, appear (but may only appear) to have regarded virtue as solely instrumental, see Annas 1993, 339ff. The other ancient eudaemonists avoided this condition, and Rand's position would have been more plausible had she learned from Aristotle or the others to avoid it as well.

Additionally, no one familiar with Aristotle should be tempted by the crude identification of virtue as the act by which one gains or keeps whatever it is one acts to gain or keep (Rand 1964, 25).

2. In a note, Campbell (2006, 368 n. 2) objects that appeals to common sense may not be worth much in issues related to egoism and altruism, a claim about which he may be right. However, I did not make such an appeal. First, though he puts "common sense" in quotes (2006, 367), he introduced the term rather than I. Second, though I did cite the ordinary or garden-variety understanding of altruism, I employed that not to settle any substantive points but to answer the question about what the term means.

I would add that it is only the availability of the ordinary usage of the term that makes Rand's attack on altruist theorists look like a mistake rather than a deliberate misrepresentation.

3. Of course, when I speak in this context of others' interests mattering, I mean mattering in their own right and not just as a function of the way they may fit into the interests of the agent, since that kind of mattering is acceptable to the egoist.

4. If egoism entails that all moral reasons are (somehow) self-interested, and if altruism entails that some moral reasons are based on the interests of others, then there are logically possible moral positions that do not fall into either camp. No actual view that I know of denies both of the entailed theses. For example, retributivists hold that the wicked deserve punishment, whether or not it does any good for anyone. All actual retributivists, however, seem to accept other moral claims that make their view some species of altruism.

5. I actually think this conclusion is too hasty. Impressive attempts have been made to reconcile the two. See, for example, Sumner 1987.

6. In Burgess-Jackson's typology, moral theories are consequentialist, when rightness is a function of the production of some consequence, or teleological, when rightness is a function of the pursuit of some end, or deontological, when the rightness of an action "is a function of the kind of action it is," thus, "any theory that constrains the pursuit or maximization of the good, or that precludes action from certain motives (such as malevolence), would be, broadly speaking, deontological" (2003, 360). This is assumed to be an exhaustive set of alternatives, for he says that "[i]n the broadest sense of the word, 'deontological' refers to any theory other than a teleological or a consequentialist theory" (360).

The class of teleological egoists, I submit, is probably empty. Those who think one ought to have the end of achieving one's own well-being generally suppose (or would, if they thought about it) that having the end is the best way to achieve the result, so they are really consequentialists. It would be very odd to enjoin aiming to achieve one's interests, even on the assumption that so aiming would not be best for those interests. As for deontological egoism, it denies an essential feature of egoism,

that if an agent were confronted by exactly two options and if one were self-interestedly better than the other, then it would not be wrong to select the self-interestedly better option. On Burgess-Jackson's proposal, an act can be wrong even when it is known to be most in the agent's interests. Most moral theories have that feature, but it seems misleading to call any such theory a form of *egoism*. Thus, Burgess-Jackson has not identified a non-consequentialist form of egoism. The teleologists are really consequentialists, while the deontologists are not really egoists.

7. Surely, the unstated argument is *not* that if Rand is a consequentialist, then she is an unsophisticated consequentialist, and since she is not an unsophisticated consequentialist, she must not be a consequentialist. What would warrant that odd first premise?

8. If, for example, one believed that, because of the goodness of aggregate well-being, its promotion counts as contributing to individual well-being, one would be holding an entirely consequentialist, moralized-interest theory. John Stuart Mill, in an 1868 letter, expressed something close to this: "in a good state of society and education," "every human being's happiness [would be] a good to every other human being" (quoted in Schneewind 1965, 339).

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