

Axiomatizing umwelt normativity

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Abstract. Prompted by the thesis that an organism's umwelt possesses not just a descriptive dimension, but a normative one as well, some have sought to annex semiotics with ethics. Yet the pronouncements made in this vein have consisted mainly in rehearsing accepted moral intuitions, and have failed to concretely further our knowledge of *why* or *how* a creature comes to order objects in its environment in accordance with axiological charges of value or disvalue. For want of a more explicit account, theorists writing on the topic have relied almost exclusively on semiotic insights about perception originally designed as part of a sophisticated refutation of idealism. The end result, which has been a form of direct givenness, has thus been far from convincing. In an effort to bring substance to the right-headed suggestion that values are rooted in the biological and conform to species-specific requirements, we present a novel conception that strives to make explicit the elemental structure underlying umwelt normativity. Building and expanding on the seminal work of Ayn Rand in metaethics, we describe values as an intertwined lattice which takes a creature's own embodied life as its ultimate standard; and endeavour to show how, from this, all subsequent valuations can in principle be determined.

No animal will ever leave its Umwelt space, the center of which is the animal itself.
(Jakob von Uexküll 2001[1936]: 109)

I wished to find a warrant for being. I need no warrant for being, and no word of sanction upon my being. I am the warrant and the sanction.
(Ayn Rand 1999[1938]: 94)

1. From Uexküll to Sebeok and beyond

A few connectors must be in place in order to go from semiotics to ethics, so we will do well to begin our inquiry by briefly recalling exactly what the established route is, especially since we intend to follow most of it ourselves. It was the Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll who first proposed the concept of “*umwelt*” or “around-world” to account for those deep discrepancies that follow from the species-specific constitution of the senses. The idea, in a nutshell, is that a worldly scene appears very different depending on which creature is doing the apprehension, be it a mussel, a fly, or a human (see Rütting 2004: 57). What we have here is an explicit realization that Kant’s forms of sensible intuition and constitutive conditions of the understanding are *biologically* relative — coupled with a tacit naturalism that doesn’t seem to be too concerned with transgressing the bounds of solipsism:

A flower stem that in our Umwelt is a support for the flower, becomes a pipe full of liquid for the meadow spittlebug (*Philaenus spumarius*) who sucks out the liquid to build its foamy nest. The same flower stem becomes an upward path for the ant, connecting its nest with its hunting ground in the flower. For the grazing cow the flower stem becomes part of a tasty morsel of food for her to chew in her big mouth. (Uexküll 2001[1936]: 108)

According to Uexküll (1909), each organism weaves a world that is tailor-made to suit it via a constant loop between “receptor” senses

and “effector” motor organs. As he put it, these are the “two arms of a forceps” by which animals come to grasp the objects that surround them (Uexküll 1957[1934]: 10). “World of action and world-as-sensed together make a comprehensive whole, which I call the *surrounding-world*” (Uexküll 1926[1920]: 127). Uexküll duly recognized that, on those terms, some umwelten would have to be more complex than others.¹ Still, the currency of the transactions within (and between) any umwelt is signs, so his theory has aptly been identified as involving a certain semiosis or sign-action *avant la lettre*.²

Uexküll’s work thus captured the attention of Thomas A. Sebeok (1989: 187–207; 1998: 31–35), a Hungarian-born linguist who came to see in the notion of umwelt an ideal template whence to develop his ambitious project for an integrated “zoosemiotic” (and later, “biosemiotic”) account of sign-use (Petrilli, Ponzio 2001).

For in his rediscovery of von Uexküll, Sebeok felt that he had not only found the long missing piece of the puzzle that he had been looking for — but he was also convinced that he had found what so many other laborers in so many other fields should have been looking for all this time as well — i.e., an absolutely naturalistic way of understanding the link between the human world of signs and the animal world of signs. [...] With now a clear vision that the abyss between sign study and biology had found its bridge, Sebeok began the project that we today call biosemiotics — a project whose goal was nothing less than a scientific understanding of how the subjective experience of organisms — as enabled differently by each species’ particular biological constitution — comes to play a genuinely causal role in the ongoing co-organization of nature. (Favareau 2007: 31, 33)

¹ It should be noted that “Uexküll distinguished sharply between plants and animals. Only the latter have nervous systems and therefore Umwelts. Plants instead possessed what he called a *‘wohnhülle’* — a cover of live cells by which they select their stimuli” (Hoffmeyer 2008: 188). However, like Hoffmeyer, we shall follow the stance adopted by Anderson *et al.* (1984) and “use Umwelt as a common concept for the phenomenal worlds of organisms, of whatever kind these might be” (Hoffmeyer 2008: 188).

² For a healthy reminder of the pitfalls associated with “translating” Uexküll’s ideas into a jargon with which he was not acquainted, see Chang (2009).

As Sebeok writes: “Uexküll’s highly original *Umwelt-Forschung* — which its creator viewed as a scientific theory anchored in Kant’s *a priori* intuitions — is truly a fundamental theory as much of sign-processes (or semiosis) as of vital functions” (Sebeok 2001[1994]: 144).

Armed with this important hermeneutic angle, Sebeok and his followers systematically revisited Uexküll’s writings and took the concept of *umwelt* further. One of the first and most important modifications made on the original framework was to own up to the externalism implicit in Uexküll’s project of grasping another creature’s viewpoint.³ Thus, whereas Uexküll had maintained (in typical Kantian fashion⁴) that “we will never find out” what the world looks like with such species-specific processing removed (2001[1936]: 107), the abler disciples under Sebeok’s tutelage went straight for the idealist jugular, as it were:

[U]nlike Heidegger, who expressly wrestled with reaching an alternative to the existing paradigms both realist and idealist, von Uexküll embraced a horn of the false dilemma: he saw himself as merely extending the Kantian paradigm to biology. He did not see that such an “adaptation” presupposed a capacity of human understanding incompatible with the original claims Kant thought to establish for rational life by his initiative. [...] The genuine adoption by a human observer of the point of view of another life form, on which *Umwelt* research is predicated, is *a-priori* impossible in the original Kantian scheme. (Deely 1990: 123; see also Bains 2001)

A further addition made by Sebeok’s school was the idea that species-specificity entails not only a *descriptive* readjustment of a creature’s apprehended environment, but a *normative* one as well.⁵ The original

³ This flies in the face of much contemporary analytic philosophy. See Nagel (1974) for a particularly influential statement.

⁴ Kant writes: “Now I cannot have the least representation of a thinking being through an external experience, but only through self-consciousness. Thus such objects are nothing further than the transference of this consciousness of mine to other things, which can be represented as thinking beings only in this way” (1998[1781–87]: A347/ B405; see also A363).

⁵ Throughout this paper, we use “normative” solely as an antonym to “descriptive” and disregard whatever other meaning(s) authors have ascribed the term.

impetus for this ambitious addition came not from ethics *per se*, but from ethology (Sebeok 1989: 198–199). Clearly it can be observed that animals react differently depending on which objects they are exposed to, and that they do so with a regularity (or “ethogram”) that is not haphazard. A good way to understand such behaviour is to describe it in terms of mutually exclusive movements of “approach” or “withdrawal” (see Schneirla 1965).⁶ As Sebeok explains, “the navigation between these two poles [...] is a daily process and therefore the organism constructs a model of the universe consisting of three kinds of things: things to be approached, things to be avoided and all the rest” (quoted in Shintani 2001: 126). The notion of *umwelt* helps to articulate this crucial idea of bringing order (and expectations) to the ongoing flow of stimuli — without casting it into a mentalist idiom that would basically allow only humans to possess one. The world-involving relational structure which binds a subject to its experiential environment thus provides an excellent template for expressing “where” the aforementioned triage might be “located”.

On this view, a creature’s sensory apparatus does not merely record a panoply of “disenchanted” objects but — perhaps more importantly — helps it order that display into an array where everything is assigned a specific normative value (Deely 2008: 482–484). Here again, the demands imposed by species membership are paramount. For an ant, the upright flower stem which lets it gain access to the core area of its home range is not just “tall”, but “good”.⁷ This suggests that ethical

⁶ Schneirla also used the terms “towardness” and “awayness”, which are sometimes referred to more generally as the “appetitive/aversive” distinction.

⁷ Uexküll once wrote that “the visible things are ordered according to their significance for our life. Everything that is near us, and has an immediate impact on human beings, is there in full size; distant and hence less dangerous things appear small. The movements of the small things may be invisible, while the movements of the things that are close, scare us” (2001[1936]: 107). Although one should not burden this passage with a level of scrutiny it clearly was not intended to bear, it might be noted that humans are increasingly gratified (not scared) the closer an attractive person is to them, and would likely be terrified by the sight of a nuclear mushroom far off on the horizon. Uexküll’s remarks about proximal and distal stimuli — what Sebeok (2001a: 125; 2001b) liked to call a “Hediger bubble” — might then be read

considerations, traditionally regarded as aloof from mundane concerns (especially after Kant 1996[1788]), might have their place in the natural order after all. Kalevi Kull, for instance, believes that “the origin of value can be seen as a problem of theoretical biology and biosemiotics” (2001: 355). It is unclear whether semiotics (or biology) has a rightful proprietary claim to such a question, especially since the topic seems to call for distinctly *philosophic* tools. Nevertheless, the idea that a species-specific *umwelt* admits of a normative dimension is definitely one worth studying further, whatever the discipline.

Unfortunately, the (meagre) positive-theoretic proposals which have been made in this vein have until now remained poorly defended, and could benefit from being fleshed out in greater, more convincing, detail. For want of a more explicit account, theorists writing on the topic of *umwelt* normativity have relied almost exclusively on semiotic insights about perception which were originally designed as part of a sophisticated attempt to refute philosophical idealism (see for example Deely 2001). The merit of that semiotic account in the field of knowledge is not being called into question here. What we would like to challenge is the assumption that values are amenable to a likewise dynamic. In particular, that claim invites the following question: *why* should there be any normativity to begin with? Indeed, despite each person’s intimate familiarity with the phenomenon of valuation, it is not at all obvious why there should even be such a feature (though the datum *that* there is such an activity strikes us as beyond question). Moreover, it is fully legitimate to ask *how* the aforementioned triage unfolds, that is, what “rationale” (if any) valuations obey. The vocabulary of “approach” and “withdrawal” is admittedly helpful as a first approximation, but it will simply beg the question if it is invoked as a causal explanation of the behaviour.⁸ Ethology does not by itself explain why one movement dominates over the other at any given time. Hence, while fecund projection from a large pool of observations

more profitably in terms of gradated levels of attentive saliency, not axiology.

⁸ For a sobering warning against hypostatizing an inquiry’s methodological distinctions and projecting them onto the worldly domain it studies, see Markoš (2009).

is good, entailment from general nomological principles would be an even more robust complement.

It is on this front that we would like to contribute. Our chief resource in this task will be the groundbreaking ideas of the Russian-born philosopher and novelist Ayn⁹ Rand (born 1905, died 1982). Rand is of course best-known for the enduring success of her massive novels, as well as for her trenchant persona. Yet Rand's literary works were followed by a series of short but highly-influential nonfiction essays in which she strove to further articulate her philosophical views (often in the light of current events).¹⁰ Like Uexküll, Rand was a freethinking theorist who, by choice, worked mainly outside the academic establishment (see Branden 1986).¹¹ Unlike Uexküll, however, she nursed a virulent aversion to Kantianism (Machan 2001: 115–119), and considered Aristotle her main influence. Although there are some clear points of departure, in many respects her systematic philosophy fits well with the biological approach championed by Uexküll and, after him, Sebeok.¹² Let us then see whether the ideas she expressed can help us make progress on some as of yet unresolved metaethical issues.

⁹ Pronounced like “mine”.

¹⁰ While the fictional material contains much of interest — it's been said that her epic novel *Atlas Shrugged* (first published in 1957) is to her philosophy what *The Republic* is to Plato's (Den Uyl 1973; Long 2007) — we shall here focus exclusively on her later, more theoretical, writings.

¹¹ However, in recognition of her various achievements, she was awarded an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters (L. H. D.) by Lewis and Clark College in 1963.

¹² A neurophysiologist familiar with Rand's work supposedly once said of one of her novels that it “was written by a great biologist” (see Branden 1986: 408). Although Rand was by no means a scientist — she steadfastly refused to make substantial pronouncements on scientific matters that fall outside the purview of cenoscopic inquiry — we know that she took biology in 1922 while completing a degree in history at Leningrad State University (Sciabarra 1999: 9). Sciabarra notes that, even though she later abandoned it, Rand often used the word “organic” in her early writings, and suggests that “it is quite possible that the concept was a holdover from her student years. Interestingly, the word ‘organic’ can be found in quite a few of the philosophic works to which Rand may have been exposed while she was a student at Leningrad University; [Nikolai Onufrievich] Lossky, a renowned philosophy professor whom Rand recollects, wrote a well-known [1917] volume called, *The World as an Organic Whole*” (Sciabarra 1998: 158n12).

2. Why? How?

In saying that an *umwelt* has a normative dimension, we commit ourselves to treading the (in)famous “is/ought” chasm David Hume flatly asserted could not be bridged.¹³ Furthermore, by situating the discussion in a broadly biological context, we endorse a certain naturalism that surrenders any methodological appeal to supernatural resources (like God’s will and so on). A high premium is thus put on any explanation that would bring the domain of “oughts” into conformity with what we know about the remainder of the (more straightforward) natural world — without denaturing the idea of normativity.

One candidate that seems to fit these desiderata is the quasi-Heideggerian thesis that the normative is wholly primitive, being imbedded in the fabric of a person’s surrounding world so deeply as to foreclose theoretical reflection (see Bains 2001: 155–161). Just as we cannot revoke our species membership, so it is argued we should accept that, when it comes to values, the die has been cast. This is ostensibly the position currently endorsed by most thinkers of a Sebeokian persuasion (no doubt because it has remained until now pretty much the only explanation on the market).¹⁴ What we have here, in effect, is a re-employment of the familiar semiotic concept of transparency which expresses well the Heideggerian argument from priority.¹⁵ However, this stance fails

¹³ Machan (2008a) claims that Hume objected only to the idea that one could *deduce* an “ought” from an “is”, but that he did not object *per se* to the prospect of *deriving* an “ought” from an “is”.

¹⁴ John Deely was an early student of Heidegger’s thought (see for example his 1971).

¹⁵ Heidegger held that “when a being is discovered in its being, it is always already a thing at hand in the surrounding world and precisely not ‘initially’ merely objectively present ‘world-stuff’” (1996[1927]: 85; pagination of the Niemeyer edition). Hence he thought that “[i]nterpretation does not, so to speak, throw a ‘significance’ over what is nakedly objectively present and does not stick a value on it, but what is encountered in the world is always already in a relevance which is disclosed in the understanding of world, a relevance which is made explicit by interpretation” (Heidegger 1996 [1927]: 150). For a contrast between Heidegger’s views and Uexküll’s, see Chien (2006: 70–77).

to provide any substantive account of *why* and *how* objects in a creature's umwelt come to have a normative dimension beyond the merely descriptive. Although they clearly marvelled at the phenomenon (see Récanati 1979: 15–28), semioticians did not take the transparency of signification at face value, but instead questioned how this occurred and developed formally coherent and materially adequate semiotic models that shed light on the apparently immediate aspect of mediation. So, to the extent that umwelten have a normative dimension, we may rightly wonder whether it is wise to endorse a stance which effectively forces us to renounce probing that feature. If we stop inquiry at transparency, any hope of understanding the action of signs disappears (and, along with it, the semiotician's job). Likewise, if we make the apparent self-evidence of values inscrutable, then values (whatever they are) will simply become imperatives to be unquestioningly gawked at, not studied.¹⁶

Beyond being unpalatable from the standpoint of inquiry, the received view is plagued by internal difficulties. Consider the following claim:

In pure perception this distinction [between mind-independent “things” and mind-dependent “objects”] is entirely hidden. Perception yields only an objective world structured along the line of +, –, 0; that is all. Of course mistakes are possible. The animal that miscalculates loses its prey and starves. (Deely 2005a: 177)

Notice the unresolved tension nested in this passage. On the one hand, values are depicted as a ready-made natural resource available simply through the (passive) employment of an animal's perceptual channels. On the other hand, failure of such non-inferential input to be life-supporting is attributed to the animal's “miscalculation”. So which is it? If something was about to spell harm or even death for a creature, then, according to the direct-perception account, one would have expected

¹⁶ That is not to say that Heidegger's writings have nothing to teach us. However, from a methodological standpoint, the commitments of the existential phenomenologist and the semiotician differ vastly.

that feature to lie in plain sight. Surely the explanation adduced is applicable to a subset of cases. Still, by and large, it seems to be untenable. As the Randian scholar Tara Smith accurately points out (2000: 85; see also her 1998): “Values are not self-evident. One cannot spot a value *as a value* in the same way that one can recognize a tree as a tree, a chair as a chair, or blades of grass as blades of grass. A beverage might look harmless but actually be toxic; a person might look menacing but be completely harmless”. However, according to the view which currently enjoys currency in semiotic circles, a toxic beverage should *look* toxic.¹⁷

It is therefore erroneous to assume that normativity unfolds in the *umwelt* in the same manner as descriptivity does. Just as the “relative being” of the sign cannot be studied directly but must rather be arrived at by the understanding (Deely 1990: 36–38), so must we do more than just open our eyes to grasp what it means to be a value.¹⁸ To be sure, the error is an innocent one, in so far as the hypothesis shows surface plausibility and has local applicability. In spite of this, exploiting an analogy with perception so as to induce a covering model is a deeply flawed project. J. L. Mackie’s (1977: 41) well-known philosophic criticisms in this regard are still germane: “It is not even sufficient to postulate a faculty which ‘sees’ the wrongness: something must be postulated which can see at once the natural features that constitute the cruelty, and the wrongness, and the mysterious consequential link between the two”.

In light of the foregoing, it seems we must negotiate two demands. On the one hand, we want to keep intact the thesis that a creature is subjected to a fairly cohesive body of norms which, owing to evolutionary circumstances, suit its biological constitution. A satisfactory theory shall therefore have to ground its account of *umwelt* normativity in the natural order, not the social or the supernatural, and exhibit a

¹⁷ Invoking “deception” and “camouflage” would be *ad hoc*, and clearly won’t do here.

¹⁸ Of course, the tensions inherent in the perceptual account of normativity dissipate the moment we take the aforementioned idea of “miscalculation” seriously. But doing so means renouncing the premise that valuation is somehow reducible to a mere act of perception. So we need a story that will not ground *umwelt* normativity in any sort of direct apprehension, lest the whole problematic become intractable.

level of rigour appropriate to the task at hand. On the other hand, we don't want to reify normativity so that its apprehension turns solely on a passive intake that is not amenable to further scrutiny. If a theory produces no convincing reason beyond self-evident intuition and/or tradition for why certain valuations are what they are, then it has failed.

3. Rand's non-reductive naturalist account

This is where Ayn Rand's account has much to offer. Rand steadfastly repudiates any direct apprehension of the normative, in so far as she insists that, as a matter of logic, identification must always *precede* evaluation (see Peikoff 1993: 154–155). Her work, in sum, can be understood as a sustained attempt to dissipate the “mysteriousness” alluded to by Mackie — albeit *not* by further buttressing the supposed link between perception and values.¹⁹ Den Uyl and Rasmussen (1986: 63) remark that Rand “is much more concerned with the foundation of ethics than most ethicists”. We cannot “see” values, Rand holds, yet neither do we “invent” them.²⁰

In Rand's view, it is through our own pleasure-pain and emotional responses that we first become aware of normative issues. In that respect, the role of these responses in the formation of normative (but not yet moral) concepts

¹⁹ As is famously the case, for example, with John McDowell (1998: 131–150), who likens values to Locke's “secondary qualities”. In fairness, though, McDowell's perceptual account is not that extravagant when considered in its greater programmatic context: “All I have aimed to do in the direction of ‘moral realism’, in my writings about ethics, is to counter bad reasons for supposing that the idea of attaining truth — getting things right — is unavailable in the context of ethical thinking. That constitutes a limited and piecemeal defense of the thesis that truth is indeed achievable in ethics. I do not see why this should seem eccentric, even at first sight” (McDowell 2002: 300).

²⁰ This reprises the classic theme of her “objectivist” stance, which centres on overcoming the mistaken opposition between what she calls “intrinsicism” and “subjectivism”. The noted Rand scholar and political scientist C. M. Sciabarra (1995; 2000) has done much to bring this *dialectical* motif to the fore.

bears a certain resemblance to the role of perception in the formation of cognitive concepts. Through these responses, the world strikes us as *normatively valenced* (that is, as containing things that are good and bad, things that are worthy of being sought or avoided). The philosophic question these responses raise is how to understand them. Physical pleasure and pain, Rand claims, are the forms in which we experience the immediate beneficial and harmful effects of their sources on our physical well-being. They are sources of normative information, albeit limited in their reach. But Rand denies that they supply an adequate foundation for *moral* concepts, as opposed to a rudimentary generic concept of one's good. Emotional responses she views as the affective form in which we experience our own (sometimes implicit) evaluations (thus fear, she holds, is the form in which we experience the judgment that something is to be avoided on account of its dangers). Emotions cannot be treated as even limited purveyors of normative information, she argues, except when we can be sure of the evaluations that underlie them. [...] It is not apparent, then, how perception or anything analogous to perception in its concrete immediacy — such as pleasure/pain responses or emotional responses — could provide a foundation for moral concepts and judgments. (Wright 2008: 165–166)

Rand's theory of values — best expressed in her seminal paper *The Objectivist Ethics* (1964: 13–39)²¹ — hinges on the recognition that biological embodiment entails not only species-specific constraints on one's perceptual access to reality (see Gotthelf 2000: 56), but also a certain bodily *finitude*. As she puts it in a very dense statement:

There is only one fundamental alternative in the universe: existence or non-existence — and it pertains to a single class of entities: to living organisms. The existence of inanimate matter is unconditional, the existence of life is not: it depends on a specific course of action. Matter is indestructible, it changes its forms, but it cannot cease to exist. It is only a living organism that faces a constant alternative: the issue of life or death. Life is a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action. If an organism fails in that action, it dies; its chemical elements remain, but its life goes out of existence. It is only the concept of 'Life' that makes the concept of 'Value' possible. It is only to a living entity that things can be good or evil. (Rand 1964: 16)

When we leave behind Cartesian dualism and strive to incorporate embodiment back into our overall picture, we commit ourselves

²¹ Originally delivered at a conference on *Ethics in our time* held at the University of Wisconsin, February 9, 1961.

to critically rethinking not only the mind and experience, but also the idea of immateriality.²² Kalevi Kull maintains that “[t]he gene sequences cannot be deduced from the universal laws of physics” (2003: 597) and that this marks the threshold where efficient causation ends and life-processes begin. Yet the cell is a precarious thing, and even if it reproduces into an organism greater than its parts, the resultant entity, though admittedly stronger than a cell, remains extremely vulnerable.²³ It is here, at the higher-level complexity where the question “How did something become ‘someone?’” (Hoffmeyer 1996: viii; see also 2008: 186) becomes germane, that normativity arises.²⁴ According to Claus Emmeche (2004: 120), “[b]iosemiotics posits that organismic embodiment is the first genuine form of embodiment in which a system becomes an autonomous agent ‘acting on its own behalf’”. Now, as David Kelley (2000: 82) explains,

[Rand’s] most important contribution in ethics is clearly her insight that values are rooted in the phenomenon of life. Values exist because the existence of a living organism depends on its own goal-directed action; in order to survive it must treat certain things as good for it and other things as bad. This is her solution to the notorious is-ought problem in philosophy, the problem of how normative conclusions can be derived from facts about the world, and it provides the basis for an objective ethics.

²² Susan Petrilli (2003: 66) has made the flatly self-contradictory claim that “the body” is “incorporeal”. Now a body can be a lot of things, but it cannot be non-corporeal. Ironically, the biological turn in semiotics originally sprang from a desire to distance the discipline from the fashionable nonsense of those who said “such ridiculous things that the serious thinkers, like the good philosophers, the scientists, physicists, biologists, just laughed and threw up their hands” (Thomas Sebeok, quoted in Shintani 2000: 53).

²³ Uexküll (1926[1920]: 129) held that “the struggle for existence is not merely one cause in the causal series, but an essential part of the general plan of life”.

²⁴ This marks a departure from the Peircean paradigm, since Peirce refused to make the customary human/nonhuman and living/nonliving distinctions (Santaella 2001). Although this divergence might be taken to raise the hotly-debated question of “semiotic thresholds” (Kull 2003: 596–598), such a partition is largely irrelevant in the present context, since the theory we are putting forth applies only to those individuals who *are* alive — whoever those happen to be.

Although values are not ready-made things in the world and cannot be taken as self-evident, they can nevertheless be rigorously studied in so far as they take root in the natural order, by way of a creature's (perilous) place in that order (Machan 2008b). Rand (1964: 16) stressed that an individual life is in a sense "more" than the sum of its parts, as the materials that make it up can persist, yet the interaction which sustains their cohesion cease.²⁵ Certain biologists have likewise recognized that "an individual is an entity that has the private aspect that is idiosyncratic and disappears upon its death, as well as the public aspect that survives its death" (Kawade 2009: 207). This, for Rand, is a fact of crucial import. If the ontological continuance of life was guaranteed like that of matter, she argues, no value could be possible, for there would be no real alternative to anything — no incentive to order one object or activity as more or less important than another. She uses the following metaphor to illustrate her point:

[T]ry to imagine an immortal, indestructible robot, an entity which moves and acts, but which cannot be affected by anything, which cannot be changed in any respect, which cannot be damaged, injured or destroyed. Such an entity would not be able to have any values; it would have nothing to gain or to lose; it could not regard anything as *for* or *against* it, as serving or threatening its welfare, as fulfilling or frustrating its interests. It could have no interests and no goals. Only a *living* entity can have goals or can originate them. [...] On the *physical level*, the functions of all living organisms, from the simplest to the most complex — from the nutritive function in the single cell of an amoeba to the blood circulation in the body of a man — are actions generated by the organism itself and directed to a single goal: the maintenance of the organism's *life*. (Rand 1964: 16–17)

²⁵ Ray Shelton (1995: 1, 3) observes that, in spite of the fact that Rand "was close to silent on the historical origins of her ethical theory [...] careful historical investigation reveals that her moral thinking shares a great number of similarities with the distinctive ethical theorizing of Epicurus of Samos [...]". He explains that "Epicurus' insight is that organic entities must act to remain alive; being alive is a conditional state. Inorganic entities [...] do not engage in self-sustaining behavior. On the other hand, organic entities must engage in self-generated processes directed at self-preservation in order to maintain their existence" (Shelton 1995: 7). It should be underscored, though, that whereas Epicurus' body of doctrines culminates in a version of "*hedonistic egoism*", Rand's ethical stance is best described as "*rational egoism*" (see Rand 1997: 505, 553–557; 1964: 31–33).

The robot in this example would no doubt encounter various objects and face sundry alternatives, but it would lack any binding standard by which to privilege some more than others. Values are thus an objective fact that flows from the *finite* biological existence of any creature. It is only because an organism can at any time lose its life that it has a tangible stake in its surrounding environment.²⁶

The world makes certain non-negotiable demands on the continued bodily integrity of a living agent (and this in accordance with its particular species membership); but that worldly domain, considered *in abstracto* of the agent, is *not* the repository of values. As Tara Smith explains (2008: 128, 130–131):

When people contemplate the objectivity of ethics, very often what they have in mind is the notion that value or propriety resides *in* certain things. They conceive of objective value as roughly some sort of substance or property that exists “out there in the world”, independently of human attitudes. Value is considered a type of external existent, and the question for objectivists and subjectivists to settle is whether any of this hypothesized stuff actually exists. [...] According to Rand, these depictions of moral objectivity suggest that the alternative to subjectivism — to value’s existing “in people’s heads” — is value’s existing “out there”, lodged within particular things. This is a mistake, however. In fact, objective value relies on contributions of both consciousness and external reality. Moral objectivity is a function of the relationship between subject and object. It is neither located in nor a product of either, to the exclusion of the other. While one might be able to find elements of the intrinsicist and subjectivist schools with which Rand would agree, it is crucial to understand that such elements represent only partial truths, in her view, that need to be supplemented by the full explanation of the dynamic that gives rise to values.

²⁶ Embodiment is typically viewed as challenging the very notion of “artificial life” (Dreyfus 1979; Ziemke, Sharkey 2001: 731–738). Yet what matters in embodiment, at least where normativity is concerned, is not some special positive (say, “vitalist”) attribute, but bodily *corruptibility*. In other words, what makes Rand’s “indestructible robot” patently incapable of valuing is not the fact that it is a “robot” but the fact that it is “immortal” (for more on Rand’s analogy, see Smith 2000: 87–90). Whether a (corruptible) artificial being could ever actively “care” about its continuity is an altogether different question. For a negative answer, see Boden (2000); which makes use of the ideas developed in Maturana and Varela (1980).

Like the sign, then, the “being” of values is essentially *relational*. This is why the notion of *umwelt* — explicitly reworked so that it straddles the false dichotomy between idealism and realism (Deely 2004b: 2–5)²⁷ — is such an appropriate place to “locate” normativity.

The various denizens of the world may be wholly “disenchanted” when considered as material things occupying a certain lot of space. But they can no longer be viewed simply in this manner when considered in relation to a concrete living agency. Semioticians interested in biology (and biologists interested in exploring such questions) will find much in Rand’s philosophy that is genial to their approach. As Leonard Peikoff (1993: 192–193) writes in his extensive presentation of her system:

No one will ever show that a man being shot and the bullet piercing his body are metaphysically interchangeable entities, since both are “merely collections of atoms in motion”. One “collection” can *die*; the other cannot. In this profound sense, Ayn Rand is unanswerably right when she says that a living organism, but not matter as such, is destructible. The one can *become* inanimate; the other already *is*.

Compare this with Jesper Hoffmeyer, who speaks of the harmful consequences of “making dead nature the model of nature at large” (2002: 99).²⁸

²⁷ Rand consistently termed these two views “subjectivism” and “intrinsicism” respectively, since she refused to forfeit the claim to “realism”. As she writes: “All knowledge *is* processed knowledge — whether on the sensory, perceptual or conceptual level. An ‘unprocessed’ knowledge would be a knowledge acquired without means of cognition. [...] [T]he satisfaction of every need of a living organism requires an act of *processing* by that organism, be it the need of air, of food or of knowledge” (Rand 1990[1966–67]: 81). This, for her, does not fall short of realism — at least not without invoking some impossible (other-worldly) standard. Given their respect for the idea that one’s species membership determines what is to be regarded as a proper gauge in epistemic and ethical matters, Randians (for example, Rasmussen 1999: 1n1) will no doubt appreciate Uexküll’s statement that “*Perfection is not omnipotence, but merely means the correct and complete exercise of all the means available*” (Uexküll 1926[1920]: 164; emphasis in original).

²⁸ The distinction between the dead and the living figures prominently in Aristotle’s philosophy (see Brogaard 1999: 209).

Although Rand's overriding concern was to provide a solid metaethical grounding for *human* morality, she never shied away from recognizing that her theory applied equally to all life-forms.²⁹ Whereas Kant "limits the moral actors to members of the symbolic order" (Cock Buning 1997: 194), the situation is altogether different in Rand's philosophy. Smith summarizes this best when she remarks that,

Much ordinary thinking about plants and animals reflects implicit recognition of life as the source of value judgments. When we assess certain events as beneficial or harmful for plants or animals, the barometer that we employ is the life of the organism. [...] What allows these evaluations is not the fact that one experiences varying feelings in reaction to such events. Rather, it is the fact that the organisms stand to gain from them; their lives can be strengthened or set back. (Smith 2000: 87)³⁰

Although from a descriptive standpoint this entails that humanity as a group no longer occupies a privileged cosmological abode, it makes each *individual* (human or otherwise) the very center of its normative universe. Whereas in Kant's philosophy we find epistemological solipsism coupled with an assignment of ethical primacy to the Other (Kant countenancing other minds in practice but not in theory),³¹ in Rand

²⁹ Hoffmeyer (1993) suggests that moral agency could be ranked according to the degree of freedom a (living) candidate exhibits in its use of signs. Although this is not implausible, such a proposal would be foreign to a Randian outlook, as it would basically make morality a matter of "ascription" by others in the light of semiotic commerce. As our opening quotations make plain, the individual subject *just has* a privileged moral significance by the very fact of being alive and wishing to prolong that state; nothing further is required. For a discussion of the topic of animal consciousness that avoids falling prey to the usual prejudices, see Allen and Bekoff (2007).

³⁰ Since in "phytosemiosis there is little in the way of choice", Deely (2005b: 209–210) contends that "only in the life of animals do things become objects, and objects become cathected and constructed according to the lifeplan of the animals as + (to be sought), – (to be avoided), and Ø (safely to be ignored)". Although there is something to be said for this view, the inference marshalled does not really follow: it is not because one cannot change or alter a given course of events that one is necessarily indifferent to those events. For example, no animal was ever responsible for the existence of the sun; but a specific biological constitution coupled with an individual desire to live and flourish can definitely make the sun a value.

³¹ Tønnessen (2003: 287) remarks that Uexküll never discussed "whether attribution

we find a complete reversal, in so far as she readily acknowledges the reality of the external world yet insists that each person must make their own (eudaimonistic) fulfilment their chief moral concern (Hunt 1999).

Citing Uexküll's sober recognition that, however much one may struggle to evade the fact, "our ego remains of necessity subjective" (Uexküll 1926[1920]: 51), Thomas Sebeok rightly noted that the "[h]urdles between egos — unlike those between cells, which are surrounded by semipermeable membranes, allowing the passage of certain chemicals and thereby certain information — are insurmountable" (Sebeok 2001a: 126). Although this has important ethical implications, it does not entail solipsism, at least not without the addition of considerable amounts of speculative scepticism.

The private aspects of these elements are essentially what are observed and described from within the living subject, and in principle cannot be completely clarified objectively from the outside [...]. However, it is an empirical fact that communication between different subjects is possible, and it is evident that mutual understanding and empathy are possible to certain extents through the public aspects of the triad [between individual, *umwelt*, and society]. (Kawade 2009: 208)

It is unfortunate, however, that theorists routinely show themselves incapable of harmoniously holding both of these tenets. The conjunction, as Rand sees it, is that whereas the descriptive sphere is publically-accessible, the normative is essentially a first-person affair.

As such, it is important to stress that for Rand it is *not* a Platonic concept of "Life" that gives rise to values, since such an incorruptible universal would by definition be incapable of corruption. Rather, if we are to understand why there are values to begin with, she argues that we must recover the *immanence* implicit in embodiment, and grant full metaphysical primacy to particular *lives* (Rand 1997: 561–562; 2005: 108).³² Hence, this first-person scale knows nothing about the God's

of moral status to animals is possible within a Kantian framework".

³² For the gradual development of Rand's views on individualism, see Rand 1999: 244–310.

eye view of species (for example, Arnhart 1998) — much less the tale and prospect of their diachronic development (see Rand 1963: 37). Social Darwinism, Eugenicism, Utilitarianism, or anything else along those lines thus has no moral purchase whatsoever on a Randian view.

A failure to appreciate this crucial point can be found in Ronald Merrill (1997), who argues that idioscopic discoveries in science could upturn the broad ethical tenets we have outlined. Invoking Rand's emphasis on the importance of adjusting definitions in the light of expanding contexts (*pace* her 1990[1966–67]: 42–48), Merrill says “change the *is* and you change the *ought*” (1997: 79). True — but it is *my* “is” that would have to change. Ironically, it was Merrill (1991: 21–50) who first called attention to the Nietzschean elements in Rand's thought, which he mistakenly took to be an early “phase” that left no substantial philosophical trace. A more appropriate assessment would be to say that while Rand dropped many elements of Nietzsche's philosophy (Rand 2005: 117; Sciabarra 1995: 100–106), she retained his anti-Cartesian emphasis on the lived body.³³

³³ One of Rand's critics writes: “One must not lose sight of the fact that it is survival that forms the basis of Rand's ethics. *Physical survival*. [...] On Rand's own terms, it is physical survival which forms the indispensable basis for a code of morality” (Robbins 1974: 93; emphasis in original). Placed in its original context, this passage was meant as some sort of *touché* criticism, the author's use of italics underscoring his palpable dismay before a thesis he takes to be self-evidently abhorrent. Whether the use of the flesh as a moral fulcrum is cause for such appal of course depends on which enthymemes one throws into the mix. Certainly, if one assumes the critic's Christian worldview (Robbins 1974: 139), it is. To his credit, though, Robbins is a perspicacious reader: his negative reaction notwithstanding, his rendering of Rand's view is irreproachably accurate.

4. Towards an explicit formalization

The upshot of a value's relational nature is that "[n]othing can be good in itself. A value is always good *to* someone and *for* some end, as Rand observes" (Smith 2006: 25). This formula shares a deep kinship with C. S. Peirce, who argued that when considering any sign we should countenance "a triple connection of *sign, thing signified, cognition produced in the mind*" (CP 1: 372), and thus defined the sign as something that "stands *for* something *to* the idea which it produces, or modifies" (CP 1: 339). Building on this parallel, we want to suggest that a value can likewise be understood as a triadic relation, one linking three elements, to wit: an *object*, a *standard*, and an *appraisal* of that object in reference to that standard. We can schematize the resultant structure as follows (Fig.1):

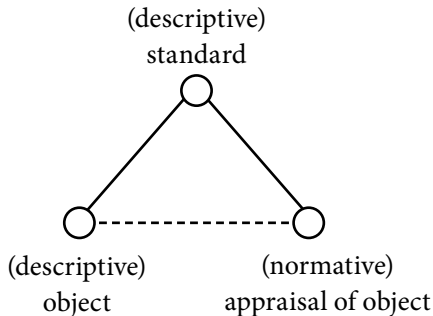


Figure 1. Informal depiction of the basic normative triad.

Just as Peircean semiotics does not prejudice what might fill its categorical place-holders, so can the parties in this triad be anything. As for the appraisal, it may be defined as the object considered plus that object's axiological status, namely value or disvalue (we will return to the more contentious idea of trivalence later). Hence, "[w]hen something is evaluated, Rand maintains, it is always appropriate to ask for

the standard of value; and objective evaluation, she holds, is always a matter of assessing something by an appropriately chosen standard” (Wright 2008: 166).

We can enhance this diagrammatic representation of umwelt normativity through a judicious use of symbolic notation. Let “S” stand for the *standard* within a triad. Let the (mutually exclusive) functors “\$+” and “\$-” signify respectively whether an object P is a *value* or *disvalue* in virtue of a standard. We thus obtain the following axiological triad (Fig. 2):

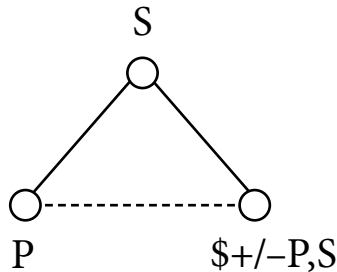


Figure 2. Formal depiction of the basic normative triad.

The expression “\$+/-P,S” should be read “The object P is a value or disvalue in virtue of the standard S”. Note that, in keeping with the theory previously canvassed, a given normative appraisal of an object is not intrinsic to that object, but rather depends on its involvement with the entire triad. Just as “something is a sign only because it is interpreted as a sign of something by some interpreter” (Morris 1971: 20), so we might say that something is a value only because it is valued by a valuer. As such, it is important that one not lose sight of the specific standard in virtue of which an object is valued, since the same object could have more than one axiological status depending on the triad it finds itself in. To avoid reification and make subsequent deliberation possible, one

must at all times keep track of which standard bestows upon an object a certain appraisal. To this end, we shall annex an appraised object with the relevant standard “S” after a comma, and differentiate it with a number in subscript.

This axiological triad can then serve as an algorithm, a basic pattern which can be repeated so as to give rise to a more complex lattice (technically, a “join-semilattice”). What permits this concatenation is the fact that any object which has been regarded as a value $\$+P$ can in turn be eligible to serve as standard S of yet another triad.³⁴ We can depict this re-employment as follows (Fig. 3):

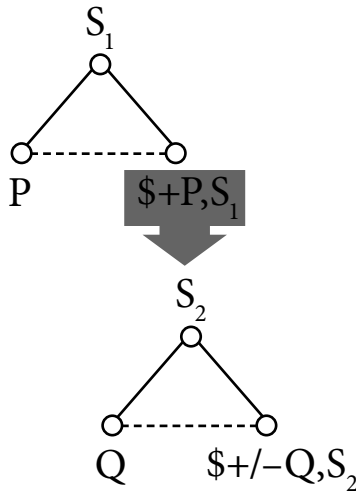


Figure 3. Recursive application of the basic normative triad.

³⁴ Addressing Rand’s metaethical theory, Khawaja writes (2008: 225–226; emphasis added): “The conditional character of life thus confronts an organism as a constant demand for a specific set of actions. In doing so, it constitutes what scholars in Aristotelian studies call an inclusive end — an all-encompassing end constituted by a set of goals which set is in turn a means to itself. In the nature of the case, life is both an inclusive and selective end: it is constituted by a set of goals, but it also serves to determine the appropriateness of a given set. *Survival-conducive goals can constitute life as an inclusive end, but malconductive goals will not*”.

In the illustration above, the standard S_2 could in principle be expanded into its pervious valuation and noted “ $\$+/-Q,(\$+P,S_1)$ ”, which would then translate as “Q is a value or disvalue in virtue of the value P which is a value in virtue of the standard S_1 ”.³⁵ Furthermore, it should be noted that the mere fact that a standard is itself a valued object in a higher triad does not by itself guarantee that all the objects appraised in connection with that standard will likewise turn out to be valued.

Using the connectives for negation (\sim) and conditional (\supset), we can distil the forces animating the growth of such an axiological lattice down to the following four axioms³⁶:

A1	$(P \supset S) \supset \$+P,S$
A2	$(\sim P \supset \sim S) \supset \$+P,S$
A3	$(P \supset \sim S) \supset \$-P,S$
A4	$(\sim P \supset S) \supset \$-P,S$

Table 1. Notational summary of the axioms legislating umwelt normativity.

Since this formalization does not partake in the project of truth-conditional semantics, affirmation and negation should here be taken to mean “absence” and “presence”, not truth and falsity. (A1), or the *axiom of value by presence*, states that “If the presence of an object implies the presence of a standard, then that object is a value in virtue of that

³⁵ Every value or disvalue can therefore be unpacked into a sort of “Ramsey sentence”, an enumerative device used in the philosophy of science to eliminate reference to theoretical entities (Maxwell 1970).

³⁶ These axioms are not found anywhere in Rand’s corpus, and constitute our unique contribution. Moreover, “axiom” is our term, not Rand’s. Rand (1963: 124–125) reserved the word exclusively for a triad of primal truths she considered implicit in anything (Machan 2001: 31–55; Champagne 2006); none of which admit of a normative dimension. So there is a genuine theoretical expansion here, coupled with marked departure in nomenclature — even though the intent is to faithfully capture her metaethical stance.

standard". (A2), or the *axiom of value by absence*, states that "If the absence of an object implies the absence of a standard, then that object is a value in virtue of that standard". (A3), or the *axiom of disvalue by presence*, states that "If the presence of an object implies the absence of a standard, then that object is a disvalue in virtue of that standard". (A4), or the *axiom of disvalue by absence*, states that "If the absence of an object implies the presence of a standard, then that object is a disvalue in virtue of that standard". If an object is a value, it remains so whenever it is considered in the relevant triad. So any subsequent triad linking with a value must treat that value as a standard to be preserved. As stated, this provides a syntax which allows for the establishment of an interwoven network of valuations.

Now the axioms legislating a lattice are themselves fairly noncommittal. For example, they entail that an engine is a value for a car.³⁷ Such triviality is a consequence of seeking to achieve a minimalist rendering. The triads gain their substantive normative content, however, when considered in their totality as an interconnected web of value-relations. Sitting atop such a lattice is a privileged supremum, namely one's individual life.³⁸ This is the ultimate "*telos*" which, according to Randian metaethics, makes all values possible. Strictly speaking, then, the car engine just mentioned would be devoid of any normative charge. For if one asks *why* it should be regarded as a "good" thing to ensure the ongoing existence of the car, one will be led to a regress without end (for example, this is needed for that, that is needed for this, and so on). What we would have, in effect, would be a brute chain of consequences devoid of any binding normative force. Only when one contemplates one's own life is such a regress halted (Rand 1997: 561). "[T]he animal may be considered as an organism actively anticipating staying alive" (Cock Buning

³⁷ A similar analogy is offered by Eyal Mozes in his reply to Long (2000: 87–89).

³⁸ DeMarco (1973: 216) anticipated some time ago that "[u]sing Peirce's categorial model, a content oriented ethics could be established by discovering, the source of value or the Firstness of Thirdness. Although this is a difficult task, I wish to adumbrate a possible solution: The source of value is human. Man is a Thirdness for Peirce; when viewed as the source of value man becomes the Firstness of Thirdness, admirable in himself as value creator".

1997: 186). The functors \$+ and \$- thus derive their respective axiologic charge from the implementation of the four axioms listed above, but the axioms themselves are ultimately answerable to a creature's will to live.

Why is *this* particular object worth keeping? There is no straightforwardly communicable answer to this — in a sense, we must plead the seventh clause of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and stay mum on the issue (see Binswanger 1992: 100).³⁹ At any rate, if a person does not see why she should live, she may test the alternative at her leisure. But assuming that a conative urge to live is present, the fact of one's own life becomes a prized fact, something entirely *sui generis*. “Bluntly stated self-production is already and inevitably a self-affirmation that shows the organism as involved in the fundamental purpose of maintaining its identity” (Weber, Varela 2002: 116; see also Campbell 2002: 310–314).

Rand agrees with Peirce that, at bottom, nothing can move an agent to action — let alone *proper* action (whatever this is eventually taken to mean) — unless that agent first “yearns” or “strives” in some primitive way to act (Champagne 2006: 37n9). As she writes: “To live is [man's] basic act of choice. If he chooses to live, a rational ethics will tell him what principles of action are required to implement his choice” (Rand 1984: 99; see also her 2005: 154). Likewise, Peirce “linked logic to ethics and esthetics: while logic is the normative science concerned with self-controlled thought, ethics focuses on self-controlled conduct, and esthetics is devoted to ascertaining the end most worthy of our espousal” (Petrilli 2003: 93).⁴⁰ John Robbins (1974: 94) notes that “[t]he fact that a living entity exists does not determine whether it *ought* to continue in existence”.

³⁹ Sciabarra accurately points out that “[i]n the Objectivist view, no antecedent, deterministic factors can explain why people choose or do not choose to focus” (1995: 165).

⁴⁰ Compare this to Hans Jonas, who, despite espousing a very different political outlook, writes that “[t]he fundamental point of departure is that life says ‘Yes!’ to itself. In wishing itself to continue it declares itself as a value [...]. May we thus say that mortality is the narrow door through which *value* — the thing addressed by ‘yes’ entered the otherwise indifferent universe?” (Jonas 1992: 87; trans. by Weber 2002: 188).

In light of the foregoing, we can see that that's entirely true: one does not have to continue living. This leads Robbins to conclude that "Rand's ethics is not a deduction from her explicit axioms about reality [...]. It is an *a-moral* choice" (Robbins 1974: 94n12). Although Robbins hastily boasts of having unearthed a devastating flaw, he is merely restating exactly what Rand espouses: the choice to further one's ongoing existence is most emphatically *not* deducible from rational considerations. "Hume's infamous 'is'/'ought' gap is a consequence of his assumption that the connection of facts to values would have to be established deductively, syllogistically. Rand's approach, in contrast, is inductive: she analyzes the presuppositions of 'value', thereby retracing the steps required to form teleological concepts, such as 'goal' or 'value'" (Binswanger 1992: 96). Biological life being what it is, those steps lead back to a "pre-discursive" element that can only be described as *voluntaristic*.⁴¹

So cutting off the uppermost value of the lattice, life (which we might express as S_0), *ipso facto* dismantles the network of interdependency which binds together every triad beneath it. When *it* goes, everything else goes. "It is actually by experience of *our* teleology — our wish to exist further on as a subject, not our imputation of purposes on objects — that teleology becomes a real rather than an intellectual principle" (Weber, Varela 2002: 110).⁴² Using a common terminology which goes back to Kant, we may thus say that, from a Randian perspective, "[m]oral 'imperatives' are thus all of them hypothetical. There are no 'categorical imperatives', no unchosen duties" (Gotthelf 2000: 84). Regardless, the consequents entailed when the antecedent of this all-important conditional *is* affirmed are not at all a matter of choice, and depend on the facts at hand (most notably the nature of the objects appraised, and what kind of creature one happens to be).⁴³

⁴¹ For differing interpretations of Rand's position on the "choice" to live, see Machan (2006) and Rasmussen (2006).

⁴² For a discussion of how Rand sees morality as grounded partially in the subject yet does not regard ethics as subjective, see Smith (2008).

⁴³ As the ethicist Tibor Machan explains: "The goal-directedness of ethical egoism is its teleological, while its relevance to rational (human) beings brings in its

Hence, according to David Kelley (2000: 54), “the Objectivist ethics [...] may be reduced to two points: the choice to live, and the law of causality. Once we accept life as our ultimate goal, we discover what it requires by discovering the causal connections between man’s nature and his life”. The nature of the agent, that of the object,⁴⁴ and that of the relation between the two — that is, whether the latter enhances or hinders the former — all three aspects go into the ontological makeup of a value (they are, we could say, individually necessary conditions). To consider just the agent is to adopt the misguided stance Rand called “subjectivism”; to consider just the object is to adopt the misguided stance Rand called “intrinsicism”; whereas to consider the two *as entering into a relation answerable to both their natures* is what she called “objectivism”. Only this last viewpoint, Rand held, is valid.

Therefore, with the desire to live secured, we may work our way down and ask anew whether an engine is a value (for a rational animal). If it is, it is not because it furthers a car, but because by transitivity it is inscribed in a concatenation of evaluative triads which in the end further one’s life. As Leonard Peikoff writes: “Goal-directed entities do not exist in order to pursue values. They pursue values in order to exist” (Peikoff 1993: 211; see also Binswanger 1990).

deontological, element” (Machan 1979: 13; see also Badhwar 2001).

⁴⁴ There is a sense in which John McDowell is correct when he contends that objects “merit” their value-attributions — even though there is a real danger of reification (or “intrinsicism”) if one asserts that “[f]or an object to merit fear just is for it to be fearful” (McDowell 1998: 144) and simply leaves it at that. Rand can be understood as agreeing with McDowell in some respects, but supplementing his account in a way that explains *how* and *why* things merit their appraisals by elucidating the *subject’s* unique contribution to the process (see Smith 2008). Whereas McDowell (1998: 146) acknowledges that “[v]alues are not brutally there — not there independently of our sensibility”, a Randian would agree and add “not there independently of one’s interests and nature”. For more on Rand and McDowell, see Wright (2008: 157–164).

5. Some philosophical and logistic issues

5.1. On using a standard other than one's life

Although in the final analysis it is the bodily life of an individual creature which is the ultimate standard that allows an *umwelt's* axiological charges to percolate down a lattice, a given appraisal need not always call upon this standard (S_0). The web of recursive triadic relations we have outlined allows for the election of any given *S* as a *local standard*. A local standard can be nominated in one of two ways, depending on the circumstances. If the ethical matter involves more than a single agent, then the local standard can represent a point of agreement between the value-lattices of the parties involved. From this nearest point of convergence (which is perforce above the area of divergence), one can seek to determine which of the competing objects best supports the local standard. If the ethical matter involves only a single agent, one can determine a local standard pragmatically, by finding the triad beyond which the dilemma ceases to make a tangible difference.

As the psychologist Nathaniel Branden (and one-time colleague of Rand) insists, “all of a man's values exist in a hierarchy; he values some things more than others; and, to the extent that he is rational, the hierarchical order of his values is rational: that is, he values things in proportion to their importance in serving his life and well-being” (in Rand 1964: 45). Indeed, Rand never tires of insisting that species-specificity for “man's life *qua* man” translates into a conjunction of animality and *rationality*⁴⁵

⁴⁵ In his (warranted) flight from the Cartesian concept of an immaterial “*res cogitans*”, Deely (2005b: 210–212) has (unwarrantedly) called into question the Aristotelian construal of the human being as a “rational animal”. Not only is this bundling questionable, so is the characterization of rationality as “something separating [the human being] from the rest of nature” (Deely 2005b: 212). Rationality is not “rationalism”. Moreover, the Aristotelian view which Rand takes up already places the defining attribute of humankind squarely in the natural order — it is a rational *animal*, after all. For an analysis of Aristotle's worldview as innocent of Modernist dualisms, see McDowell (2002[1994]: 66–86). For Rand's view of reason as the human animal's basic means of survival, see Peikoff (1993: 193–198).

(Rand 1963: 14–15, 120–122; see also her 1999: 276), and that the centrality of conceptual thought in a human creature’s life places a host of attendant demands on it (Wright 2005).⁴⁶ So not only is the discernment of values not automatic, there may also be a need for rational deliberation — even though it is always a person’s individual life, and not the canons of argument,⁴⁷ which is the ultimate source of normativity.

The determination of a local standard is thus no substitute for a complete account of an axiological fabric, since no other standard can support the weight of a lattice. The use of this tool should therefore be construed as a provisional measure for which an exhaustive account could in principle be given. Whether the use of a local standard is determined by agents’ shared commitments or topical relevance, the aim is the same: the methodological reduction of unnecessary cognitive labour.⁴⁸

5.2. On deliberate control and discursive deliberation

Tara Smith recognizes that “[c]ertain salutary events can occur without the beneficiary’s having done anything to bring them about. [...] [A] value is that which one *acts* to attain. [...] If some benefits are beyond a person’s control, he can only hope for them” (Smith 2000: 84; for a similar concern, see Merrill 1997: 81–85). This means an automatic —

⁴⁶ In keeping with our desire to discuss the normativity of *umwelten* in general, we have deliberately steered clear of addressing requirements specific to humans. See Smith (2006: 48–246) for a complete catalogue of what Rand considered essential. For a discussion of the relation between mere survival and complete human flourishing, see Saint-André (1993), as well as Hunt (1999).

⁴⁷ For a critique of Jürgen Habermas’ (1990[1983]) attempt to universalize moral prescriptions by tying them to the commitments presupposed in communicative acts, see Powell (2009). Sciabarra (1995: 314) notes that “Rand would have vehemently rejected Habermas’ emphasis on ‘intersubjectivity’ and the social consensus of norms [...]. Honesty for her is not primarily a social relationship; it is a relationship between the mind and reality”.

⁴⁸ In many ways, it resembles W. V. O. Quine’s use of a “modulus” to pragmatically constrain his holism (see Quine 1999[1960]).

yet very much valuable — fixed action pattern like a “pumping heart” would not be so much a value as a *constituent* of a standard like life. As far as our formal system is concerned, the requirement of intentional control or conscious authorship alluded to by Smith can be dropped. We shall instead follow Harry Binswanger (1992: 85) in construing “self-generated” as those cases where “the energy for the action is supplied by the acting entity, from a source integral to its own structure, rather than by external factors”, with the upshot that “[b]oth conscious actions and vegetative actions are self-generated” (Binswanger 1992: 85). In fact, our conception of values is even more relaxed than this: fortuitous benefits, to the extent they contribute to the presence of a standard *qua* “benefits”, fully qualify as values (*mutatis mutandis*, fortuitous hazards are disvalues).⁴⁹

In the same vein, it is important to understand that the distinction between human and animal consciousness is largely peripheral to our ethical account. This much should be apparent from the fact that the theory we have presented applies equally well to creatures, like plants, that have no consciousness in the demanding sense (in fact, avoiding mentalism is one of the main attractions behind using the organon of semiotics to express Rand’s theory).

Conceptual abilities may mean that human creatures deliberate in a fashion that is unique to their species. But it is not those species-specific attributes, nor the complex discursive networks which arise from them (Hoffmeyer 1996: 112), that are the source of values. In that regard, we can be understood as rehearsing in the field of ethics a criticism analogous to that voiced by Sebeok (1988) in semiotics, by holding that social norms are *secondary* to the more primitive biological logic they overlay.⁵⁰ Even though a lattice of values is hierarchical and can get extremely elaborate (Kohlberg 1971), there is no point beyond which *umwelt* normativity suddenly makes an about face that places a creature

⁴⁹ A similar interpretation is endorsed in Johnson (1999).

⁵⁰ For a helpful sketch of how these levels relate to each other, see the tri-level analysis developed by Sciabarra (2000: 364–383), which can be fruitfully compared to the account proposed in Kawade (2009).

at odds with its embodiment. Just as (non-Saussurean) semiotics holds that the conventional/symbolic order originates from and is constrained by the forces that govern the non-verbal/indexical order, so the presence of cultural norms cannot gainsay the naturalist principles we have outlined — although complexity can, to be sure, afford a considerable delay in the recognition of this fact.⁵¹

Rand argued that in the history of normative philosophy the primary question of ethics has usually been: What values ought one to pursue? But for Rand, to begin ethical inquiry with this question is to commit the fallacy of reification. Rand explained that most philosophers have taken the existence of ethics for granted, reifying the historically given codes of morality, but never considering their existential foundation. (Sciabarra 1995: 237)

This taking for granted of accepted cultural practices is expressed rather acutely, for example, in so-called “deontic logics”, which exploits an analogy with the modal operators first proposed by Lewis and Langford (1959[1932]): “obligation” is likened to “necessity”, and “permission” to “possibility”.⁵² Despite surface variations, one trait common to all such approaches is their heavy reliance on some prior authority which somehow “permits” or “obliges” certain actions and not others — and this in accordance with a rationale left conveniently unexplained (see for example Kalinowski 1953: 150–151). While there is something to be said methodology-wise for omitting certain specifications, we have followed Rand’s lead and have sought to give deeper, more substantive, reasons why normativity should be binding to begin with (Rand 1990[1965]; see also Merrill 1991: 113–116). Otherwise, we

⁵¹ Environmental pressures must be obeyed for an organism to thrive, lest it incur an allostatic overload that brings about serious pathophysiological consequences. Now there is no doubt that the ability to forecast long-range (and sometimes counterfactual) scenarios makes this range of tolerance much more plastic in the case of rational animals, and that societal division of labour dramatically magnifies this leeway. Still, the limits remain (see Champagne 2007: 220–256).

⁵² The comparison was drawn (independently, as it happens) by the Cambridge scholar G. H. von Wright (1951) and the Polish logician Jerzy Kalinowski (1953).

are left with the same unanswered questions encountered earlier: Why? How?⁵³

Satisfactorily answering these questions requires a certain give-and-take adjustment between the pre-reflective and the theoretical. We are all “thrown” into life (to borrow a nice expression from Heidegger) such that by the time we begin philosophizing, each of us already owns at least one natural language, a more or less cohesive set of metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical beliefs, as well as a stock of bodily habits — all of which were acquired quite by default. There is nothing wrong with this. But one consequence of endorsing the Socratic project and leading an examined life is that this starting point must be subject to *bona fide* alteration, since nothing prevents substantial parts of it from being unjustified. Hence, as Roderick Long observes: “Since Rand believes conventional morality is not justified, [...] saving the appearances of conventional morality is not a mark in favor of a moral theory in her eyes” (Long 2000: 55).

5.3. On the rejection of mechanism

It goes without saying that rational deliberation on ethics is not available to creatures that, from a species-specific standpoint, are not equipped with the cerebral means whereby to reflectively consider such matters. The flipside is that even though they have a clear stake in the world, such life-forms have no need for any meta-cognitive policing to begin with, since they never weave implausible semioses that call into doubt their own flourishing as the proper moral end of their conduct.

That said, one must guard against a common *non sequitur* we would do well to flag: it is not because an organism systematically makes the right life-supporting/enhancing evaluations that it necessarily does so “mechanically” (for example, perceptually or “by instinct”). Indeed,

⁵³ For Rand’s views on “ethical dilemmas” (like the ones famously proposed by Thomson 1976), see Rand (1964: 49–56; 2005: 113–114).

there is no valid deductive inference from across-the-board covariance to lawful causality. Following Mill's methods, the supposition is very much motivated, and the regularity at hand should in all reason attract our explanatory attention. But as one inquires further into such an arresting behavioural uniformity, one should never lose sight of the fact that, logically speaking, the situation leaves open the possibility that the covariance might be the product of a mediated (triadic) interrelation, not necessarily an immediate (dyadic) cause-and-effect sequence — especially, one would think, when living things are involved. This is largely preaching to the choir, since semioticians as a group tend to be more sensitive to this important feature. Still, as testified by the continued influence of “Morgan's Canon” in ethology, there is a strong bias against exploring that totally legitimate possibility.

The chief benefit of using a sign-theoretic approach, then, is that it does not compel us to implausibly project the rationale we have uncovered into the “minds” of organisms (Campbell 2002: 312–313). Criticizing what he sees as a weakness in Rand's account, Gregory Johnson writes (1999: 140):

[G]iven the natures of a fly and a toad, if the two are placed in proximity to one another, value relationships arise automatically: the toad is a danger to the fly; the fly is a meal for the toad. For plants and animals, then, value is a *two-termed* relationship between objective states of affairs and the continued existence and flourishing of a living being. [...] For man, however, there is a crucial difference. Whereas for plants and lower animals, value relationships are “direct” and unmediated by consciousness, for man, value relationships are *mediated by the judgments of the mind*. [...] For man, then, the good is a *three-termed* relationship between (1) an entity, action, or state of affairs, which is (2) evaluated by a subject in light of (3) the standard of man's life.

Leaving aside the unsettled exegetical question of whether Rand actually held such a view,⁵⁴ the disjunctive menu of options being

⁵⁴ Rand seems to oscillate hesitantly on this point. She writes that “[a] plant has no choice of action”, but admits soon thereafter that “there are certain actions which it is able to perform to combat adverse conditions” (Rand 1964: 19). The latter statement appears to be more apt. In fact, one could argue that, with notable differences in leeway, the idea of an ethogram is fully transferable to the case of plant-life, in

presupposed by Johnson is far too coarse. Indeed, the semiotician well knows that “unmediated by consciousness” does not necessarily mean “unmediated”. The ethicist Irfan Khawaja, who is heavily influenced by Rand’s theories, lapses into precisely this error:

Whatever their simplicity or complexity, the lives of non-human organisms proceed more or less automatically — from metabolism, homeostasis, and growth through locomotion, learning, and cooperation. Non-human organisms are in short automatic deterministic value-trackers with life as their ultimate value, and an automatic awareness of, and propensity to act on, their needs. (Khawaja 2008: 229)

Although one can see why Khawaja (or Johnson) would say this, a danger nevertheless lurks of construing a consistently morally perfect being as a machine without merit. So not only is the inference from the systematic to the automatic logically inconclusive, it also yields a philosophically undesirable result.

Traditional Cartesian dualism, with its bifurcated ontology, basically assumes that if a lattice is not implemented actively by *mental* means, it is perforce answerable to passive *mechanical* processes. While there is no denying that certain creatures match the former conception, the consensus in semiotics is that the latter is inapplicable to living things, and that there is a graded range between the two extremes. Hence, we can agree with Rand (1964: 19) that “[c]onsciousness — for those living organisms which possess it — is the basic means of survival”, yet hold fast to the idea that, for those living organisms which *don’t* possess such consciousness, other means of orchestrating their conduct can very much be employed.⁵⁵ The situation will of course vary

so far as “[p]lants are sessile, highly sensitive organisms that actively compete for environmental resources both above and below the ground. As do all such living systems, they must somehow assess their surroundings, estimate how much energy they need for particular goals, and then realize the optimum variant” (Witzany 2008: 40). Unless one glosses the terms “assess”, “estimate”, and “goals” as a vocabulary devoid of any real basis, these organisms clearly seem to be pursuing their self-interest in a manner consistent with the principles we have defined. What is needed to allay Rand’s oscillation is an account of *choice* before situations that admit of *no* alternative (see Champagne 2007: 227–237).

⁵⁵ As Donald Favareau (2007: 19) eloquently puts it: “[T]hose creatures lacking

wildly from one species to another. But in all cases, the axioms we have presented stay the same, and ascent to three-place relations is all that is required to get our formal system in motion.⁵⁶

Despite this rejection of strict mechanism, we should nevertheless emphasize that our axiomatization of umwelt normativity does not license ontological excesses. In a reactionary move, it has recently been stated that “in no case should actions or behaviours be interpreted as the result of an inferior psychic faculty, when it is possible to interpret them as a result of a superior faculty” (Martinelli, Bankov 2008: 408). However, Morgan’s Canon and its recent “evil twin” are both misguided because each seeks to establish a set of ontological preferences *in advance of the evidence*. The case for a semiotic approach to biology is best made, not by dogmatically promoting some privileged metaphysic, but by meticulously pointing out the irreducibility of most life-phenomena to efficient (two-termed) causation. Jerry Fodor (2002[1990]: 6) once cynically remarked that “[t]he great virtue of instrumentalism [...] is that you get all the goodness and suffer none of the pain”. Since the ontological commitments are already made *de facto*, all one need do is insist that theorists own-up to them *de jure*. If there is a *real* need in biology to countenance something “more” (Hoffmeyer, Emmeche 1991), then the supplementary posits will eventually find their way. Existence needs no midwifery.

language and the ability for abstractive thought are no ‘less’ minded in the functional and biological sense than those lacking opposable thumbs (or, for that matter, gills or wings) are any ‘less embodied’. [...] The single most compelling reason that the biological function of ‘knowing’ is not likewise included in the list of universal attributes of living organisms is *not* because it isn’t happening [...], but because our very *idea* of what *constitutes* ‘knowing’ has been warped by Descartes’ conflation of ‘mindedness’ *per se* with ‘human mindedness’ and ‘knowing’ *per se* with ‘symbolic cognition’. [...] If so, then the bee can never ‘know’ what flower to land on, the deer can never ‘know’ which other animals in its surround to mate with and which to flee from, the penguin can never ‘know’ which chick is her offspring, and — in fact — all other living beings except the human [are] essentially the input/output automatons that Descartes claimed they are”.

⁵⁶ For a highly suggestive demonstration of the special status of triadic relations, see Peirce (1998[1905]).

5.4. On objects strong enough to matter but too weak to be decisive

It is conceivable that the presence or absence of a given object might exert only a mild influence on a standard. For example, it could very well be the case that S should benefit from the presence of P (following axiom A1) yet remain present within a given axiologic lattice without the presence of this *particular* instance of P. In order to accommodate this, we shall accept only *tokens* as the referents of S.⁵⁷ It thus suffices, then, that the absence of an object translate into the absence of a single token of a standard to establish that this relation falls within the reach of, say, the axiom of value by absence (A2). This explains why Rand (1964: 81) held that any situation that imperils the presence of a standard — regardless of the extent — vitally matters.

At any rate, this dynamic is not symmetrical: types or tokens of P affect only tokens of S; but the “downward causation” whereby a standard bestows upon an object an appraisal always does so upon that object as a type. Hence, if “property” is the standard in virtue of which the presence of the object “theft” is a disvalue $\$-P,S$ (*pace* axiom A3), then *all* thefts are disvalues. Likewise, something need not be life-threatening *per se* (in one particular instance) to be evaluated as objectively life-threatening. While this is ostensibly more intuitive in the lower regions of a lattice, suffice it to say that it spares us the sorites paradox which, at *every* meal, would repeat “Surely *this* cholesterol-laden serving of fast food won’t hurt me” (or, conversely: “How can *this* vitamin tablet possibly help me?”).

⁵⁷ This is concordant with Rand’s views in epistemology (see her 1990[1966–67]: 98–99).

5.5. On the idea of a “neutral” valence

It may be asked whether it is possible for an object P to be appraised in virtue of standard S yet yield neither a value ($\$+P,S$) nor a disvalue ($\$-P,S$) in virtue of that standard. As mentioned, those working in the Sebeokean tradition have customarily countenanced a “neutral” value as part of an umwelt’s normative landscape. The question, then, is whether, given our commitments, we should too. Amongst Randians, there are basically two schools on the matter. Peikoff, Binswanger, and Smith hold that, “[w]ith regard to life, who is not for it is against it. No proposed value is neutral” (Binswanger 1992: 100; see also Peikoff 1989).⁵⁸ This stance is motivated both by the hierarchical structure of values (expressed in our system as a recursion of the basic triad) and the account of whence values ultimately derive their very normative force. On this last point, Smith (2000: 93) writes:

It is important to appreciate that life is the source of value because life or death is the fundamental alternative that a person faces. By “fundamental”, I mean that all of a person’s other alternatives depend on this alternative and affect this alternative. The point is not simply that a person must be alive in order to choose among alternatives. Rather, all the other choices carry consequences that affect whether a person lives or dies. Consequences need not be equally momentous or direct to be real. [...] Our actions’ effects on our lives are inescapable.

This interpretation has been challenged most prominently by the philosopher David Kelley. He states: “Peikoff claims that ‘every fact bears

⁵⁸ It can be argued that this axiologic “excluded-middle” is confirmed in ethology and psychology, which describe approach and withdrawal as *biphasic*. Thomas Sebeok, as we saw, took it for granted that such a tug-of-war gives rise to three valences. However, such a gloss would seem to require that an organism engage (non-trivially) in a deliberate (one is tempted to say “self-conscious”) posture of indifference, being neither drawn nor repulsed however mildly (or potentially) by an appraised object. The intercession of a genuine appraisal of neutrality is crucial here, since it would be platitudinous to say that a non-appraised object is not appraised either way (unfortunately, this seems to be what Sebeok originally had in mind). Whether such a hypothetical state of unconcern could ever be characterized as a *positive* one is the bone of philosophic contention.

on the choice to live'. The claim is obviously false as stated. The number of hairs in Plato's beard, or blades of grass in Peikoff's lawn, has no bearing on my choice to live" (Kelley 2000: 20). Both Peikoff and Kelley agree with Rand that values have an objective natural basis in the finitude of biological lives. That said, Kelley believes her theory "implies that *some* facts have value significance, not that every fact does; the latter is a separate issue" (Kelley 2000: 21). This is not to say that neutrality somehow equals "meaninglessness" or "nonsense" (in the manner once held by the logical positivists). When Kelley — who defends a sophisticated form of direct realism in the realm of perception (see Kelley 1988) — maintains that certain things have no value significance, he is not maintaining that these things have no "significance" *tout court*. He readily acknowledges, for instance, that one can intelligibly refer to those descriptive objects which he otherwise considers neutral from a normative standpoint (like the number of blades of grass in Peikoff's lawn). His contention is rather that these objects can be so insignificant that they pass through the holes of an agent's axiological net, as it were. Deely (2004a: 18) seems to side with Kelley on this point:

But the 0 objects, the *Gegenstände*, what status do they have in the Umwelt? Thure von Uexküll suggests that they have no status at all, that they "do not exist" for the nonhuman animals, and I would not doubt that in this he expresses exactly his father's view as well. I am not so sure. I think that the animals often — I think of the so-called "higher" animals, those able to 'learn from experience' that is — have an awareness of the "zero-object", in that "zero" here does not mean 'nonexistent for awareness' but rather 'something that may be in awareness neither as to be sought nor to be avoided but simply as to be safely ignored'.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ In many ways, this resembles Kalinowski (1953), who countenanced three valences, namely the positive, negative, and "indifferent". However, one shouldn't read too much into this, as the addition of a third axiological valence stems mainly from a desire to conform to Kant's influential tripartition of modalities into the problematic, assertoric, and apodictic (1998[1781–87]: A74/B100–A75/B101). Deontic logics are simply compelled by their propositional format to countenance a "P" not subject to any modal operator. Kelley's decision to incorporate a neutral value is, by contrast, a much more deliberate philosophical move.

The topic is a complicated one, and we will not attempt to settle that debate here. Let us only note two things. First, it isn't much of a leap to say that objects which are neutral are, all things being equal, "good" for an organism. Second, if anything can be subjected to a standard and an axiological status thus derived, then it is hard to imagine an object that would have no impact whatever on *any* triad in a lattice. Since there is no *a priori* constraint on what can and cannot be subjected to such a test, the problem seems to rest on a conflation, such that those items usually considered value-neutral are not so because they intrinsically merit that attribution, but rather because an agent has not yet had cause to catch them in a web of triadic appraisals.⁶⁰ For that's really all that is needed to transitively be linked back to an agent's life.

5.6. On Kantianism

Jakob von Uexküll (1926[1920]: 16) held that "since the activity of our mind is the only part of Nature directly known to us, its laws are the only ones that we can justifiably call laws of Nature". This basically reprises Kant's contention that "we ourselves bring into the appearances that order and regularity in them that we call *nature*, and moreover we would not be able to find it there if we, or the nature of our mind, had not originally put it there" (Kant 1998[1781–87]: A125).

Although one could hardly have imagined such a thing possible, Ayn Rand is even more impassioned than John Deely in denouncing this quintessentially Modernist idea that "any knowledge acquired by a process of consciousness [...] cannot correspond to the facts of reality, since it is '*processed* knowledge'" (Rand 1990[1966–67]: 81).⁶¹ Rand cites Aristotle as her principal influence, and singles out Aquinas as one of

⁶⁰ For a mathematical elaboration genial to that view, see Touchstone (2008); which has some notable affinities with Sharov (2001: 224–227).

⁶¹ Interestingly, "Rand's teacher, [Nikolai Onufrievich] Lossky, was the chief Russian translator of Kant's works. [...] It is entirely possible that Rand absorbed inadvertently a Russian bias against Kant" (Sciabarra 1995: 153).

the few philosophers worthy of praise (Rand 2005: 148–149). Likewise, Deely confesses that while Uexküll “had received his main philosophical formation, I take it, from the German writings of the Master of the Moderns, Immanuel Kant”, he instead came to philosophy by way of “the Latin writings of Thomas Aquinas on Aristotle” (Deely 2004a: 14). Deely goes on to add (2004a: 18) that “where Uexküll in his original work speaks of the subject-object dichotomy, a split very comfortable in modern thought, I, coming from my Latin background, did not and do not find the dichotomy comfortable at all”.

Deely is to be commended for having reworked the inconsistencies of Uexküll’s initial insights in the direction of a more thoroughgoing realism. In so doing, he has given semiotics very potent tools which, if properly handled, can enable it to overcome some familiar philosophical quagmires. Yet it should be remembered that Kant had deliberately counted on the inscrutability of the *ding an sich* “in order to make room for *faith*” (1998[1781–87]: Bxxx), since he expressly recognized that, on purely naturalist terms, the “moral ideas and principles” which he upheld would “collapse along with the *transcendental* ideas that constitute their theoretical support” (Kant 1998[1781–87]: A468/B496).⁶² This certainly holds true for a certain set of ethical claims — albeit not those we have here advocated. At any rate, although one could argue that “making room” for an irrational belief against all worldly evidence

⁶² Kant’s writings originally appealed to the body in order to explain the primitive manner in which the subject constitutes the space around it (see, for example, Kant 1992[1768]). These features of Kant’s “pre-critical” thought were of course abandoned in his later, more famous works, since they relied on a mode of investigation which, Kant eventually held, yields “contingent” conclusions that fall short of the necessity required to answer the sceptic. Although some have argued that Kant’s early work “anticipated various insights into the constitutive force of our body for spatial constitution usually attributed to phenomenology” (Woelert 2007: 140), it seems more accurate to say that the body’s species-specific configuration was for Kant a ladder he resolutely discarded upon waking from his pre-Humean slumbers. In a 1773 letter, for example, Kant decried the “eternally futile inquiries as to the manner in which bodily organs are connected with thought” (Kant 1999[1749–1800]: 141) — a statement that could not be more antithetical to Uexküll’s (and, less prominently, Rand’s) biological approach.

to the contrary is a dishonest move (Rand 1984: 77–79), Kant at least had the merit of being consistently transparent in his inconsistency. Deely, however, has sought to reject the first *Critique* (1998[1781–87]) whilst leaving the basic ethical outlook of the second *Critique* (1996[1788]) completely unchallenged. The compromise, we submit, is untenable (even Kant saw that). A good way to summarize our principal contention would be to say that, to truly understand umwelt normativity, a break from *both* halves of the Kantian system is required.⁶³

6. Conclusion

Building on the work of Jakob von Uexküll, Thomas Sebeok and his school emphasized that any species-specific umwelt perforce has a *normative* dimension. In a bid to constructively expand on this important idea, we've added another Eastern-European thinker to the mix, and have called on Ayn Rand's seminal ideas to explain *why* and *how* objects are given a normative charge.

We began by briefly recapping the main developments which led to the increased visibility of biology in semiotic inquiry, and looked at how the pregnant notion of umwelt has come to be regarded, not only as the site of descriptive identifications, but of normative appraisals as well. We then criticized a prevailing interpretation according to which such valuations are akin to perceptual acts. Upon highlighting some important lacunae in that account and laying down some key desiderata, we presented the major ideas that comprise Ayn Rand's theory of values. In a bid to further expand on those insights, we introduced various notational and diagrammatic devices that allow us to capture in greater detail the law-like principles which spawn valuations. A recursive triadic structure was proposed, as were four axioms.

The influence of Peircean semiotics upon the first of these features, triadicity, is manifest. But our proposal has important repercussions

⁶³ For recent support of this view, see Rasmussen (2008).

for current theorising as well. For one thing, it casts doubt on the possibility of there being such a thing as a “neutral” appraisal — although we’ve happily left that question open. More importantly, it seems that, contra “unlimited semiosis”, the re-employment of values as standards is very much a *finite* process. For unlike meaning, which can (and in an important sense must) extend beyond the scope of the individual creature, our investigation strongly suggests that Umwelt normativity patently *cannot* extend beyond that purview, on pain of uprooting the very fountainhead whence all values draw their potency.

Although we tried to tie up a few loose ends by cursorily addressing some of the more pressing technical and philosophical issues raised by our theory, we prefer to think of this contribution as open-ended. That preliminary foray no doubt leaves many gaps to be filled and aspects to be improved. Rand’s writings contain a wealth of insights and nuances scholars have only recently begun to appreciate in full.⁶⁴ Moreover, she is virtually unique in contemporary English-language philosophy in that she made it a point to vividly dramatize the practical bearings of her tenets by way of fiction. We, on the other hand, have concentrated mainly on dry technical issues. That narrow methodological angle has thus skewed the picture somewhat. Accordingly, one would do well to avail oneself of those further textual resources before passing judgement on the tenability or attractiveness of a given aspect of Rand’s position.⁶⁵ Still, in spite of these inherent limitations, we hope

⁶⁴ Reviewing a study by Etkind (2001), Cathy Young (2004: 192) expresses the “hope that Etkind’s essay is only the beginning of Rand studies in Russia”. If primary sources are any indication, this desire will likely be fulfilled: “The first printing of an anthology of [Rand’s] writings, translated into Russian in 1993, sold out in Moscow after two days” (Nora Sayre, quoted in Gladstein 1999: 112).

⁶⁵ It might be worthwhile to diffuse four common confusions, which pertain mainly to that subset of organisms which are human: 1) concluding that one should act in one’s self-interest does not yet specify what those interests consist in, such that “[t]he 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” (Rand 1964: 57); 2) rejecting the idea of sacrificing oneself to others does not *eo ipso* imply sacrificing others to oneself (Rand 1963: 81; 1964: ix); 3) the decision to live may be either-or when considered in the abstract, but it can be implemented with

we've succeeded in developing a novel and robust account which sheds light on many issues that have hitherto remained largely unexplained. Where there were coarse intuitions based on shaky analogies, we now have a tangible working model grounded in a fairly secure biological account of bodily life.

Now it bears emphasizing that semiotics alone has not produced these results; the doctrine has provided only the means to fruitfully articulate tenets that are philosophical through and through. Since the study of signs is by itself normatively inert (Deely 1990: 12; Baenziger 2008: 227), we have combined it with Rand's ideas. The resultant picture paves the way for a naturalist account of normativity which has the power to greatly enhance our understanding of that intriguing feature of umwelten. To be sure, these explanatory benefits come at the price of discarding many received assumptions about what constitutes proper ethical conduct (Rand 1963: 117–119). By our lights, this inadvertently confirms an important semiotic tenet, namely that genuine discovery always involves an element of surprise.⁶⁶

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varying degrees of consistency in the course of one's life (Rand 1975: 142–152); and 4) a system of ethics should not be expected to solve issues which properly belong to the political sphere, nor could such a system ever eliminate the possibility of aberrant conduct.

⁶⁶ An abridged version of this paper was presented before the British Psychological Society (Consciousness and Experiential Psychology section) at St. Anne's College, Oxford, in September of 2010. The author wishes to thank Serge Robert, Matthew Schaeffer, Robert Myers, Ryan Tonkens, and anonymous referees from this journal for helpful critical feedback on earlier versions. The continued support of York University's Department of Philosophy is also gratefully acknowledged.

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Постулируя нормативность умвельта

Исходя из утверждения, что умвельт организма имеет не только дескриптивную, но и нормативную функцию, многие ученые пытались связать семиотику с этикой. Но эти выступления ограничивались повторением моральных постулатов и не могли должным образом развить наше знание о том, как и почему существа начинают упорядочивать встречающиеся в своем умвельте объекты согласно их аксиологической ценности. При этом теоретики исходят почти без исключений из семиотического подхода к перцепции, созданного изначально для опровержения идеализма. В настоящей работе предпринимается попытка доказать, что ценности кроются в биологическом измерении, отвечая видоспецифическим требованиям, и предлагается абсолютно новое решение, пытающееся обрисовать изначальную структуру, которая является основой нормативности умвельта. Основываясь на основополагающих работах Айн Рэнд о метаэтике, в данной работе ценности описываются в виде переплетенной решётки, где высшей ценностью, которая является мерой всех остальных ценностных суждений, является жизнь самого существа.

Postuleerides omailma normatiivsust

Inspireerituna väitest, et organismi omailmal on mitte ainult kirjeldav, vaid ka normatiivne dimensioon, on mitmed teadlased üritanud semiootikat siduda eetikaga. Siiski on selles suunas tehtud sõnavõtud seisnenud peamiselt juba laialt tunnustatud moraalsete intuitsioonide üle korrutamises ning ei ole suutnud konkreetsel moel edendada meie teadmist sellest, kuidas ja miks hakkavad olendid oma omailmas esinevaid objekte aksioloogilise väärtuse või väärtusetuse põhjal korrastama. Püüdes asja selgemalt kirjeldada, on teoretikud nimetatud teema käsitlemisel lähtunud peaaegu eranditult semiootilistest tajukäsitlustest, mis olid algselt kujundatud osana idealismi kummutamiseks mõeldud keerukatest arutluskäikudest. Lõpptulemus, milleks on teatud vahetu antus, on olnud kõike muud kui veenev. Käesolevas töös üritatakse anda kombatavat sisu mõistlikule oletusele, et väärtused peituvad bioloogilises dimensioonis, vastates liigispetsiifilistele nõudmistele, ning esitatakse täiesti uudne lahendus, mis püüab välja joonistada omailma normatiivsuse aluseks oleva algstruktuuri. Tuginedes Ayn Randi põhjapanevatele töödele metaetikast, kirjeldatakse käesolevas artiklis väärtusi kui põimitud võret, mille ülimaks mõõdupuuks on olendi enese kehastunud elu, ning näidatakse, kuidas kõik ülejäänud väärtushinangud sellest mõõdupuust lähtuvad.