

MAN'S LIFE VS. THE FULFILLED LIFE

by

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David Kelley's review of Den Uyl's and Rasmussen's Liberty and Nature in the July 1992 issue of "Liberty" sparked an interesting debate between him and Greg Johnson in the November issue under the title, "Did Rand Stack the Ethical Deck?". Two issues are involved: does Rand's principle of Man's Life as the standard of value have shortcomings which could be cured by replacing it with the Aristotelian concept of flourishing (also know as self-actualization or self-realization) and how does this affect the derivation of rights?

Kelley argues against Den Uyl's and Rasmussen's proposal for substituting flourishing for Man's Life as the standard, primarily for two reasons. First, "flourishing is supposed to be a richer concept: it means living well through the realization of a wide range of our capacities. But then how do we determine what is involved in flourishing?" Second, Man's Life relates to the fact that the fundamental alternatives are existence or non-existence, whereas flourishing does not. "[E]very value and every virtue that goes to make up a good life must be shown to have a bearing on survival; in one way or another, it must enhance the prospects for self-preservation." And, it "takes a *full* life to ensure *mere* life." Kelley admits that "establishing these connections is a very large task, and I don't think Objectivists have fully carried it out." I'll return to the issue of what is involved in flourishing. It is not as hopeless as it sounds from Kelley's remarks.

My approach regarding the role of Man's Life as the standard differs from Kelley's and Johnson's. I agree that Man's Life could still act as a sieve for catching actions and options which are life-enhancing. There are many values which enhance our life but I hold that Man's Life does not help us organize this lump of diverse values into a meaningful life, that Man's Life as the standard does not help us answer some basic questions in life. Of all of the life-enhancing occupations, hobbies, sports and other activities, how do I choose among them? How do I allocate time between my work, family and other interests? And, there is one huge area of life on which Objectivist literature is almost completely silent, probably for good reason: how would one justify having kids on the basis of enhancing one's survival as a rational being? Like their diapers, children are a messy subject and represent a difficult challenge to the Objectivist ethics. There are a lot of things

parents do for their children that involve financial, emotional and physical strain as well as causing the parents to delay or defer pursuing other values. More importantly, parents often do things, as discussed later, which do not devolve benefits directly to the parents as the primary benefactors. That is, the parents' welfare is not the motivating factor.

As the above discussion tries to show, a crucial question remains unanswered: what does it take to live a full life? Just picking any values that happen to survive the standard doesn't add up to a life well lived. Merely striving to life does not entail living a fulfilled life. We need an additional principle to help us sort out these values. It could be argued that this principle is part of goal setting, hence not part of morality. My response is that self-fulfillment determines *what* values drive the goal setting mechanism. Goal setting techniques affect *how* effectively we achieve values. (See Steven Covey's excellent *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.) I'm recommending, however, that we need the principles of flourishing to set the *direction* of our life: what occupation is better for us than another, what recreation is more suited to our personal identity, what kind of relationships we want to enjoy and what mission(s) we want to fulfill. These are not trivial issues; they might not affect whether we continue to exist or not but these choices do determine the kind of existence or the quality of our life which will ultimately affect how happy we'll be. We need organizing *principles* as well as purposed to live a good life. And, for this reason, these principles should be a part of morality.

Specifically, *how* do we choose and prioritize our values using Man's Life as the standard? To address this let's consider some questions many of us face or will face. For example, a career is supposed to be our central purpose. If so, how do I choose one? Should I become a nuclear engineer, a nurse or a newspaper journalist? All three careers are legitimate endeavors; none require sacrificing my well-being, and all can be rewarding. How then does the standard of value help me decide?

If productive work is the "central value that integrates and determines the hierarchy of all his other values," how does it help me decide how much time and energy I should devote to other areas of life, such as family, social relationships, recreation, etc.? It is obvious I can't devote so much to these other areas that I can't work effectively. Conversely, would it be OK to spend all of my time on my career? It seems that using my career as a yardstick is inappropriate for prioritizing my other activities.

In the areas of family, social activities, and recreation many sub-activities and specific values lie *within* them. Taking just family life as an example there are decisions regarding what I will do with my spouse (play tennis, go out, etc.) and with my kids (take them to the zoo, read them stories, discipline them, and so on). I am not saying we need a cookbook formula which automatically cranks out a schedule for us. (I don't think there is such a formula.) I am saying Man's Life as the standard of value does not appear as helpful or as definite as a casual reading might lead us to believe.

For instance, anyone who is a parent knows the challenges of having and raising children. Besides the demands on the parent's time, there can be significant to severe financial and psychological pressures. Often the welfare of the child takes precedence over the parents. How is the decision to have a child justified strictly by using Man's Life as the standard, or by your survival? On a more limited scale, how are the interests of the family balanced with the needs of your work?

Let's consider Jane, who highly values the time she spends with her husband and children as well as her weekly tennis match with her friends. Jane's company is bought out by another and in the ensuing reorganization Jane must travel almost all the time. Jane enjoys the challenges of her work, but she is unhappy because she has little, if any, time for her other interests. How does Rand's advice help her? If her work is her central purpose, can Jane justify her decision to leave the company to take a less exciting job that requires little or no travel? How does Man's Life as the standard of value, rational self-interest, teleological measurement, and having a productive purpose assist Jane in sorting out what she should do?

Here is another example (an actual one). Jim is a plant manager for a local company. He is told he has been picked to replace the plant manager of another factory located about 100 miles away. Jim wants the job but is faced with a problem. His son, a senior in high school, is the star quarterback for the school football team. Jim knows if he moves his son to a new school near Jim's new job his son will probably not be the quarterback. This means his son will lose out on the chance for getting a college scholarship and may even affect his college football career. Jim chooses to *commute* 200 miles every day during his son's senior year. Jim therefore chooses to put himself through the strain of a long commute primarily for the sake of his son, in addition to the long hours he has to put in as plant manager. (One could argue that Jim benefits by doing this because of the potential

savings in college expenses a football scholarship would bring. Even so, this is a high price to pay. It is also highly unlikely this is the only or major reason for Jim's decision.) Jim, like many typical parents, will undertake this challenge in order to help his son.

Each parent chose to rearrange their life, possibly at significant expense, to achieve a value. Did the value contribute to their long-term self-interest? (i.e., was the father or mother the sole or even the primary beneficiary as Rand recommends?) In both cases the parent is obviously using something other than his career or his life as a reference point. What is it? What is their guide for choosing? If we claim the decisions affected their "survival" as rational beings, answering yes seems to stretch the concept of self-interest quite a bit. Would applying Man's Life dictate the parents to *not* do what they did? It seems more plausible to say we mean the values tie in to their self-realization or fulfilling their life's mission. Both parents could be achieving part of their overall mission to support those he or she loves the most. This might entail actions that appear altruistic, but aren't necessarily since the value achieved provides some benefit to the parent (even though the kids and spouses might feel they benefited more and aren't paying the price in taking a less demanding job or commuting long distances.) There also is the idea, which I can't expand on here, that the process of valuing means the value becomes part of your self. Thus, if you love someone, you make them part of your self; helping them means you help yourself in an indirect way.

STANDARDS AND PRINCIPLES

Consider this quote from Ayn Rand in her essay, "The Objectivist Ethics."

"It is only by accepting 'Man's Life' as one's primary and by pursuing the rational values it requires that one can achieve happiness -- *not* by taking 'happiness' as some undefined, irreducible primary and then attempting to live by its guidance. *If you achieve that which is good by a rational standard of value, it will necessarily make you happy* [emphasis added]; but that which makes you happy, by some undefined emotional standard, is not necessarily the good."

And this one by David Kelley in the November issue of "Liberty."

"Moral standards are concerned with the needs and capacities of man *as such* [emphasis added], the things that are common to all humans.

Morality tells me to rely on reason, to hold my life as a sacred value, and to seek organizing principles in my life.”

While what makes you happy isn't necessarily the good, I hold that the converse also holds: namely, what meets the ethical standard does not necessarily make one happy. The reason for this is that the standard of Man's Life holds true for *all* men: it is a generic principle based on the general nature of man. However, each of us has an individual nature consisting of our individual temperament, interests, inclinations, etc. which needs to be factored into our decisions about how we live our own individual life. Rational self-interest helps us ensure we preserve our cardinal values but we need another principle to help us choose our *specific* values.

Kelley seems to hint at this when he refers to “organizing principle.” This is an area that desperately needs to be fleshed out if we are to be successful in implementing the spirit of the Objectivist ethics. At present we have the theoretical defense of self-interest while we lack these “organizing principles” for leading us to happy, self-fulfilled lives.

To this end, I propose we *supplement* Man's Life as the standard with a principle that applies to our own life, to help us give shape to the amorphous lump of values allowed by the standard into something suitable for our specific needs. The most fruitful option is to revise the second principle Rand offered in her ethics: the purpose of our life is to be happy through the achievement of rational values. Her concept of happiness is somewhat akin to the Greek concept of eudaimonia, which Edith Hamilton has summarized as: to exercise vital powers along lines of excellence in a life affording them scope. I would say that our purpose is to be fulfilled as a person, to progressively achieve values appropriate with our identity, our ideal self (our “daimon”) and with our mission in life.

Self-fulfillment entails discovering our individual nature as a person, deciding in what direction we want our life to move and what we want to accomplish with our life. Self-fulfillment asks: what am I uniquely suited to do, what kind of person I want to become (given the constraints of my individual nature) and what kind of life I want to lead?

As Kelley says general moral principles tell us what we as men should and should not do to enhance our lives. We then apply these conclusions to our own life by saying: “Because I am a man, I should live by reason. I should not obtain values by lying, cheating or

coercion." But this is still too abstract. Using "should" makes it sound like we are complying with a duty and it does not account for our individual nature, culminating in this attitude: "I am the kind of person who lives by my reason. It is not in my character to live on unearned values. I am responsible for my life."

A person seeking self-fulfillment then could ask questions like: does the contemplated value best utilize my unique powers? Does it bring out the best within me? Does it allow me to grow in the direction appropriate to my nature? The Greeks best summarized this approach with "Know thyself" and "Become thyself."

The question could be asked why should we pursue self-realization? Do we have an inherent duty to be excellent (as some eudaimonist philosophers seem to advocate)? Emotions may not be tools of cognition, as Rand frequently reminded us, but they do provide the *motive* for what we do. The ultimate aim in life, after all, is not to be rational, but to be happy, which is an emotional state. Reason is our guide; a fulfilled life is the goal. All of our activities, such as working, playing, loving, etc. are just stepping stones to an emotion. The purpose of life is to be fulfilled. Eudaimonia is that fulfilled state; eudaimonism, as a part of moral theory, provides the principles we as individuals can apply to reach that state. Unfortunately, I've seen too many Objectivists who live to be rational -- they live for the sake of reason -- instead of being rational in order to be happy.

DEFENDING RIGHTS

My approach on the issue of defending rights also differs from Kelley's and from Den Uyl's and Rasmussen's. Kelley says: "Even if I understand that your freedom is good for you in exactly the way that my freedom is good for me, I don't yet have a reason for regarding *your* freedom as a good for *me*. But this is precisely the point that must be established if we are going to validate rights on the basis of ethical egoism."

My understanding of Rand's defense and definition of rights differs. We need rights to defend our ability to pursue and obtain values which support and enhance our life. Rights derive from egoism in that egoism posits man's right to live his own life and this right needs to be protected in social settings. Life is the source of values; rights protect our freedom to live and pursue values. Rand says in her essay "Man's Rights" that "as to his neighbors, his rights impose no obligations on them except of a *negative* kind, to abstain from violating his rights."

In her "Ethics of Emergencies" she writes: "One's sole obligation toward others ... is to maintain a social system that leaves men free to achieve, to gain and to keep their values." And, in "The Wreckage of the Consensus," "The only 'obligation' involved in individual rights is an obligation imposed ... by the nature of reality (i.e., by the law of identity): *consistency*, which, in this case, means the obligation to respect the rights of others, if one wishes one's own rights to be recognized and protected."

This is a different approach than Kelley's (which doesn't make Kelley wrong, of course). Rand doesn't seem to try to tie rights back to *our* self-interest. I won't comment specifically on Rand's argument but will instead discuss the need to weave several strains of thought in order to build a case for rights. These strains exist within the Objectivist philosophy although these are not discussed much. Plus, there seems to be a natural tendency for us to focus on what we think is the one "right" (and often strictly deductive) approach to the exclusion of others.

Rand based her ethics and her politics on the *metaphysical* nature of man. She held that we are individuals by nature: we are born with the tools we need to survive (assuming we are raised to become normal, mature adults). We may need adult help in order to grow and as adults we also need others in order to live well, but fundamentally we are metaphysically independent creatures.

The other strain in Objectivist thought is the need for *objectivity*, to evaluate the facts as they are without trying to wish them into being something else. Objectivity then would entail that we recognize the metaphysical independence of others. We would observe the rights of others because we benefit, of course, by having a stable social framework but also because it's, as Wilford Brimley would say, the right thing to do. We can't claim rights for us without also defending them for others since rights are a generic principle like Man's Life as the standard of value is in ethics.

In ethics, there is the question of whether it's right to violate the rights of others. And, there is the issue of one's character I referred to above. Do I want to be the kind person who wants to have my cake and eat it too (i.e., defend my rights while denying the rights of others)? If I recognize that it is in everyone's best interests (except maybe predators) to have a healthy society in which rights are properly and clearly defined, I recognize that everyone has the same metaphysical nature I do and I want to lead a life of creating values

versus expropriating them, then the concept of rights makes sense and is something I would endorse and observe. I would *want* to observe the rights of others because that is the kind of person I want to be, not just because I conclude observing rights somehow benefits me directly. It is, of course, to my benefit to have rights objectively defined and consistently defended.

Den Uyl and Rasmussen arrive at the same essential end as Kelley and Rand. The later want a concept to defend our ability to act because it is a requirement for living. Den Uyl and Rasmussen want rights to defend our ability to direct our lives, a requirement for living well. We can fulfill our selves if we can't direct our lives as we see fit. Rand's approach is broader in that it includes those who may not want to pursue self-actualization. They may just want to live like, say Homer Simpson. Den Uyl and Rasmussen, I'm sure, would not deny Homer his right to lie on the couch after a hard day of sleeping at the nuclear plant, but their focus is more on protecting the conditions needed for Homer if he suddenly decided to become the company president.

In the end, it seems that the two sides in this debate reach similar conclusion about what rights entail but by somewhat different routes. But, it also seems clear that more work needs to be done on Rand's ethics and politics and a debate like this is long overdue. The deck isn't stacked. It just needs to be dealt and played.