

Capitalism and Morality

ARISTOTLE AND AYN RAND: ANCIENT EUDAIMONIA AS SUCCESS VS. MODERN EUDAIMONIA AS SURVIVAL

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“My philosophy in essence is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity and reason as his only absolute.”

Ayn Rand

Ethics is defined as a set of principles of right conduct, or a theory or system of moral values. Throughout history, philosophers have appropriated a sufficient amount of time establishing a moral code or ethics to assist themselves, as well as other individuals, in making the right choices, so that they may flourish as human entities and acquire happiness. Aristotle, one of the most brilliant and influential philosophers in ancient history, and Ayn Rand, one of the most brilliant individuals in modern tradition, are no different. Both philosophers identify that an individual's life is its standard of value; thus, all actions made to further life are good, and those that threaten life are evil. Additionally, eudaimonia (happiness or success) is the ultimate end, and both philosophers conceptualize their own pathways to achieve ultimate happiness, or what they perceive as living the best life, because living the best life is achieving complete happiness. However, their ethics do veer in different directions. Aristotle, who did not articulate a model of an ideal human being or an outline of the ideal life, experience or activity, focused on the best life a human can live theoretically by observing individuals throughout his society and drawing conclusions, which he then conceptualized into treatises. Ayn Rand, whose work often praised and reflected the philosophy of her predecessor, Aristotle, focused on actions that hindered the survival of man. She agreed with most aspects of his ethics except for one crucial concept, the fact that he did not specifically plot an “ought to” list for individuals; thus, Aristotle does not tell his readers what is “morally right.” Rand expounds upon this by formulating a “scientific process” for individuals to achieve eudaimonia. Furthermore, she discredits Aristotle's position that the ultimate life and ultimate happiness are only reachable by a select few by explaining that her method is equally attainable by all.

Aristotle was born in 384 B.C. at Stagira, in northern Greece. His father was Nochomachus, the court physician to the Macedonian royal family. He first studied medicine, until he was sent to study philosophy in 376 B.C., where he stayed at Plato's Academy until about 347. Although he was one of Plato's most brilliant students, he disagreed with some of his teachings, and when Plato died, he was not appointed head of the Academy. He left Athens and spent the majority of his time traveling in Asia Minor, and its islands. He returned to Macedonia to tutor Alexander the Great, who eventually conquered

Athens. In Greece, Aristotle opened a school of his own, the Lyceum. After Alexander died, his subjects revolted, and Aristotle and his politics were placed in an unsafe situation. To escape persecution and eventual death, Aristotle fled to the island of Euboea, where he soon perished.

Throughout Aristotle's life, he has written 150 philosophical treatises, all of which ranged from various subjects like biology and physics to morals and aesthetics to politics. Aristotle applied the same patient, careful and descriptive approach to his examination of moral philosophy as he did in all his other works. His collection of ten books, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, exemplifies his moral philosophy and is one of his most well known pieces of writing. The goal of the *Ethics* is to determine how to best achieve eudaimonia, happiness or flourishing, as a human. He begins by explaining that all human activity aims at some end that is considered "good;" therefore, the highest human good is an action that is an end in itself. That ultimate good is eudaimonia or living a happy life. Attaining this good involves fully conforming one's actions with his or her rational nature as a human being. Thus, a person will exhibit a personality appropriately balanced between reason and desires, with moderation characterizing all. By exhibiting this lifestyle, man will receive less satisfaction from things like physical desires and material goods and a greater satisfaction from the acquisition of virtue because true happiness can only be attained through the cultivation of virtues.

Virtues are temperaments to act in a certain way, in a response to similar situations. Through habitual action and correction, good conduct arises, thus, making ethics a practical discipline. A person with the virtue of temperance will not only show confidence in the face of temptation, but will view temperance as good. However, an individual who was not properly raised and depicts the vice of excess by not having the knowledge of when "enough is enough," will, therefore, acquire a skewed view of the good life.

In addition to the study of virtue as a means to ultimate end, a happy life, Aristotle then discusses the doctrine of the mean. This doctrine states that virtuous habit of action is always an intermediate state between the vicious extremes of excess and deficiency. A virtuous man does not have too much or too little but just the "right amount." For example, the virtuous mean of courage stands between rashness (the excess) and cowardice (the deficiency). Aristotle explains that this doctrine is not an exact science because there are no exact laws or exact formulations in practical science. Rather, he encourages his followers to approach matters case by case. Virtue can only be learned through constant practice, which implies that there are not set rules, only trial and error. Through trial and error, man decides what path is relative to him and will lead him to a life of eudaimonia.

In addition to his doctrine of the mean, Aristotle states that human beings cannot pick and choose their virtues because he views all virtues as stemming from one source. Therefore, one cannot acquire the virtue of courage and not temperance. A virtuous person is an individual who exhibits all of the virtues not just a select few. Aristotle's ethics is concerned with what constitutes a good character; since all virtues branch from one unified character, no truly good person can depict some virtues without depicting them all.

Aristotle's study of virtue and ethics as a practical science led him to the examination of the aspects of nature involved in acting and accepting moral responsibility. Acting responsibly and engaging in proper conduct, requires thinking about a potential action in a specific way. This type of knowledge is not reflected in either the demonstrative knowledge of the science or the aesthetic knowledge applied to crafts. The distinctive mode of thinking that adequately provides for morality is practical intelligence or prudence. This ability understands the true character of the individual and community welfare and applies its results to the guidance of human action. Deliberative reasoning, as it is sometimes defined, first requires an individual to consider each of the many actions that are within one's power to perform. Second, an individual must then contemplate the extent to which of the actions would assist the

individual in meeting his or her ultimate goal or end, happiness. Lastly, once decided which action will best fit the end, the individual voluntarily engages in the action.

Once discussing how a man may act in a morally responsible and proper way, Aristotle furthers his discussion of moral action by arguing that knowing what is right does not automatically result in doing the right thing. Individuals, at times, suffer from a weakness of will, which is simply, categorized by Aristotle, as a failure of intelligence. What sometimes happens is that the overwhelming prospect of some great pleasure can blind an individual from his or her perception of what is truly good. Despite the misperception, Aristotle does inform his readers that this will not cause great harm and will not completely hinder a man's quest for the attainment of virtue and happiness.

Two of the ten books of Aristotle's *Ethics* are devoted to his discussion of the importance of friendship as a vital element of a good life because attaining happiness is a public affair not a private one. The three types of pleasure described by Aristotle are the friendship of pleasure, the friendship grounded on utility, and the friendship for the good. Developing these types of friendships not only benefits and provides pleasure for the individual but also enables a person to develop his or her over goodness.

Aristotle ends his depiction of moral philosophy in the *Ethics* by providing a more detailed description of the achievement of true happiness. He states that pleasure is not a good in itself and worthwhile activities are associated with their own distinctive pleasures. Therefore, one's life is guided by engaging in pleasant activities rather than the unpleasant. Genuine happiness lies in the action that leads to virtue that provides true value and not just amusement or pleasure. Furthermore, Aristotle believes that contemplation is the highest form of moral activity because he exalts the eventual attainment of wisdom as the highest of all virtues. Wisdom deals with unchanging and universal truths, and contemplation is continuous, pleasant, and self-sufficient and since it is the activity of wisdom, it must be the highest activity of human life. Thus, the philosopher gains wisdom through contemplation throughout his entire life; therefore, this person is the only being capable of true eudaimonia.

As an eventual admirer and predecessor, Ayn Rand expounded upon the ethics of Aristotle, by warping and adapting her theory of ethics to the modern era of philosophy. Rand was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, on 2 February 1905, to Jewish, middle-class parents. When she was 16 she enrolled in the Petrograd University, where she graduated three years later, in 1924. She majored in history, but it was evident that her specialty was philosophy. After graduation, she studied at the State Technicum for Screen Arts, until the year 1926, when she immigrated to the United States. Following careers as a screenwriter, a script reader, a typist, and a filing clerk, she turned to novels and is best known for the works of *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), *The Fountainhead* (1947), and *We the Living*; together these novels have sold over 12 million copies. After finishing her final novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, she was offered a position, by Nathaniel Branden, to compose a periodic series of lectures on the basic principles of Objectivism, the philosophy that Rand developed in her novels. Together Rand and Branden published *The Objectivist Newsletter* until 1968. Finally, from 1968 to 1976, Rand produced her own monthly tract, titled the *Ayn Rand Letter*. She died in 1982, but left behind an impact of unique thinking embedded in her philosophical writings as well as her novels.

Ayn Rand's Objectivist Ethics are primarily depicted in her novels, like the famous *Atlas Shrugged*, but she did write, as previously stated, a series of articles. "The Objectivist Ethics," is an example of an article that illustrates the basis of her ideals implanted in her novels. Rand emphasizes the concept of man as a heroic being that can achieve great things with the universe disposed to his efforts. This concept is the hallmark of her philosophy, the cornerstone in her ethics, and the niche of her widespread appeal. Time and time again, contrary to previous ethicists, like Aristotle, she emphasizes the importance that every man is endowed with equal opportunity to achieve greatness and, thus, eudaimonia or happiness. A person's own survival and happiness is the ultimate good and can be achieved through the acquisition of

virtues. The identification of values is only possible through the use of reason, and, furthermore, values are impossible to attain without virtues.

Rand identifies three cardinal values: Reason, Purpose, and Self-Esteem with three corresponding virtues, Rationality, Productiveness and Pride. Reason is our means of survival, and human survival, as Rand states, is the ultimate value, one that each individual must choose to discover and enact the means necessary to achieve. Someone who does not utilize reason to pursue survival has no values and is irrelevant to ethics. Rationality is the acceptance of reason as one's only true source of knowledge and guide toward the right action. This virtue requires a man to be independent (another virtue) in his thinking and show integrity (another virtue) in all his actions. Rationality also requires the use of two other virtues, honesty (not faking reality) and justice (a moral evaluation of others). Man's survival also envelops purpose, where all actions and the adjoined purposes center on this ultimate productive purpose, or the use of reason to create products and services necessary for survival. To attain rational purpose, one must be certain of his competence and worth and acquire self-esteem. Finally, acquiring this value requires the attainment of pride, which is the commitment to live up to the highest rational standards. Rand identifies the above as her code of values with "man's life" as its standard. This code allows for rational choices and decision-making through the use of virtues, the acquisition of values, and eventually the ultimate value, the survival of a man's life; this exact science, as Rand calls it, will lead man to eudaimonia or happiness.

In addition to her moral code or code of values, Rand argues that to achieve happiness requires a morality of rational selfishness, one that does not give undeserved rewards to others and does not ask them for oneself. Contrasting the self-sacrificial and altruistic approach of traditional moral codes, Rand and other objectivists have retained an egoistic approach to communal living. This lifestyle, formulated for the era of industrialist and capitalists, rejects the ideal that acquiring happiness requires sacrificing oneself for others and promotes that a harmony of interests exists among rational individualists. One's benefit and happiness does not have to come at the expense of others. As previously stated, the human mode of living is production, making value out of raw materials. Each individual sees use or utility out of some material (a tool out of rock); therefore, every person is a creator, making new goods through productive work, materially and morally. Material "well-being" is possible for everyone; no one should become poor so that others may be rich.

Rand is adamant in promoting this ideal, specifically in her "Virtue of Selfishness." She condemns the virtue of altruism, or devotion of oneself to the interest of others, by claiming that it will render a person to have no self-esteem, see humanity as a tribe of doomed beggars, and view existence as fundamentally desperate. She firmly states that one is to always act in accordance with the hierarchy of one's values and never sacrifice a greater value to a lesser one. Sacrifice is always wrong and since the highest moral purpose is one's achievement of happiness, actions like donating money for food to a third-world country, an action that directly offers no benefit to one's welfare, is a sacrifice and is wrong. However, if one were to question if it would be objectively moral to assist a friend, she would advise the individual to aid his or her friend. Friendship and love are selfish in her view because an individual incorporates the welfare of his or her friends and family to his or her own welfare. Therefore, not assisting a friend is objectively immoral because it inhibits the overall welfare of the person. However, she is not stating that one is forbidden from helping those he or she does not know who are less fortunate, she is simply stating that one is not obligated. Man creates goals for himself and, throughout his lifetime, he works through his own efforts to achieve them. If the individual's goals are consistently at the mercy of, or sacrificed to, others, he or she will not accomplish the goals and will not achieve eudaimonia.

Both Aristotle and Rand are similar, almost identical, in key aspects of their ethics. First, they both agree that achieving eudaimonia, or happiness, or success (as it was defined in Aristotle's era) is the ultimate good that all human beings should strive for. Second, to achieve this good, one must acquire values. Third, acquiring values requires that man incorporate rational thinking and virtues, in order that he

or she makes the right decision that will lead them to the ultimate end. Finally, both philosophers agree that a hierarchy of values is simulated in one's mind; this will make the decision process easier when a conflict of values erupts. The individual will know what choice to make that will yield the greatest benefit and will not steer the person off course.

The similarities of Aristotle and Rand provide for the cornerstones of their ethics. However, fundamental differences and, personally perceived, flaws do exist. Aristotle matured, studied, and wrote his treatises in ancient Greece. In the ancient era of philosophy, Aristotle failed in two aspects of his ethics. First, he failed to provide a model of the ideal human being. Second, he did not provide an outline of the ideal experience or life. However, Aristotle did not view his exemptions as a mistake; his goal was not to tell individuals how they ought to live by conceptualizing a template on which actions or lack of actions will enable one to achieve eudaimonia. Rather, he observed individuals in his surroundings and drew conclusions, from those observations, on which type of person embodied a moral lifestyle. Additionally, he relied and promoted the ideal that one's experience will provide him or her with the ability to acquire values and, ultimately, eudaimonia. Nonetheless, Aristotle's position that he was not recommending, requiring, or even advocating the examples he describes, left readers and followers with no clear "yes" or "no" on how to act. People are simple, they want to be told what should be done and when to do it; Aristotle's ethics did not provide that.

The last aspect of his ethics that appeared faulty was his definition of true happiness. He defines and projects eudaimonia as something godly and only graspable by a select few. He explains contemplation and the gaining of wisdom as the only true moral action; thus, a philosopher would be the only individual proficient to achieve this end. This ideal is elitist and leaves his followers with a feeling of false hope. Not everyone is capable of being a philosopher and even if people live their lives to the best of their abilities, they may still never achieve what Aristotle views as greatness.

Rand's approach to ethics is fully modern. She admired and respected the works of her predecessors, especially Aristotle; however, she recognized the flaws in his ethics and by incorporating modern philosophy, attempted to "fix them." She removed Aristotle's elitist approach by conceptualizing courses of action that can be accomplished by everyone, at least in principle. She claimed that everyone has the capability to achieve eudaimonia if they adhere to her "scientific method" of obtaining values by reason and virtue. This approach removed the potential false hope of her followers and actually increased her "likeability" as a philosopher. Another major difference, from Aristotle, in her work was that her moral code was intended to provide a template for readers on how to live the right and moral life. She did recommend, require and advocate the principles and moral code she conceptualized. Individuals are capable of visualizing what she deems as the right course of action, a "what not" and "what ought" to do list, and are filled with ambition that they can accomplish eudaimonia.

However, Rand's ethics is flawed in a crucial aspect, her "Virtue of Selfishness." Unlike Aristotle's views that friendships, and the development of relationships is a crucial aspect to achieve happiness, she views the pathway to happiness as extremely individualistic. Friendships and love only exist to benefit the "well-being" of the person. No good exists in a relationship alone; one is unable to be genuinely happy to be a communion with another individual, he or she must only focus on the benefit that is received. Aristotle was valid in believing that a relationship is a vital part of man's existence and one retains a greater benefit in helping others, even if that does entail sacrifice. A fair amount of an individual's happiness depends on the overall happiness of others.

Finally, offering a Christian approach to Rand's atheistic "Virtue of Selfishness" would nearly invalidate her entire claim. Rand's theory incorporates no room for mercy because man must never sacrifice for others and give to those who are unearned and undeserving. If God did create all that exists, a new value and nature of reality would inevitably guide man's behavior. Man's highest value would be the

admiration of the Maker. Thus, all values would be conceptualized in light of Him, and, if one is to remain true to the highest value, the excellence of God including his mercy, one's behavior must reflect it in merciful acts.

Despite the flaws and differences in the ethics of Aristotle and Ayn Rand, both philosophers are successful in formulating theories that reflect the diverse worlds they lived in. The concept of eudaimonia is forefront in both ethics and achieving this requires establishment of value, the acquisition of virtue, and the utilization of man's capacity to reason. Furthermore, placing man's life as the ultimate value, one in which all values actions end, will yield survival, success, flourishing, and happiness for an individual. All can attain happiness, and living a life of morality will yield that fruit, because as Ayn Rand states, "Happiness is a state of non-contradictory joy—a joy without penalty or guilt, a joy that does not clash with any of your values and does not work for your own destruction."

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