

BOOK REVIEWS

Liberty and Nature: An Aristotelian Defense of Liberal Order. By Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl. La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1991.

The authors of this excellent book have attempted a difficult task. Aristotle's conception of proper politics strikes many historians of philosophy as antithetical to classical liberalism. Leo Strauss, a noted defender of classical political thought, sharply separates natural law from modern "natural right," which abandons the pursuit of virtue. Alasdair MacIntyre denies that the Greeks had a concept of individual rights at all. In bold defiance of orthodoxy, Rasmussen and Den Uyl defend both a version of Aristotelian ethics and a limited government, free-market social order. As they say themselves, to many this appears "an attempt to square a circle" (p. 41).

Two contemporary thinkers have strongly influenced the authors: Ayn Rand, the founder of Objectivism, and that Nestor of Aristotelian philosophers, Henry Veatch. The first of these may arouse misgivings, because of the imperious tone of Rand's writing: *Roma locuta, causa finita est*. But there is none of that here. Quite the contrary, the authors pay close attention throughout to contrasting philosophical views and reply to them in careful detail. Indeed, the book opens with a response to several philosophers who either attack Aristotelian ethics or defend positions at variance with it. Although the discussion of each of these writers—Charles King, Gilbert Harman, Robert Nozick, and Alan Gewirth—raises valuable points, I recommend that lay readers begin with the second chapter. In it the authors commence the direct statement of their own position.

Rasmussen and Den Uyl pose in the second chapter a question that at first glance seems irrelevant to ethics but is in fact fundamental: How can living things be understood? The answer does not lie entirely within the realm of physical science: "When it comes to understanding what living things are and how they grow and develop, teleological explanations seem to be required" (p. 43). A teleological explanation appeals to something's goal or end in order to explain it. Thus, if one says that the heart beats in order to circulate blood through the body, an entire philosophy lies implicit. The heart's operation cannot be

grasped through purely mechanical analysis; not to understand the goal of its activity is to have failed to penetrate to its essence. More generally, living things can be fully understood only through appeal to their natural ends.

Among living things human beings occupy a special place. People are not governed by instinct but are free to use their intelligence in order to regulate their behavior. To some philosophers, freedom extends to the ultimate choice of goals. We cannot ask whether someone's desires are right; rationality is purely instrumental. It answers the question: How can a goal best be achieved? It cannot by itself prescribe a goal. Ludwig von Mises was an advocate of this position.

Rasmussen and Den Uyl dissent vigorously. "It is important to note here that human freedom for an Aristotelian natural-end ethics is not . . . a freedom with respect to what is the natural function or end of a human being. Human volition has a teleological character. Though the exercise and direction of specific volitional acts is entirely dependent on the individual human being, volition as an inherent power of a human being is for the sake of human well-being and fulfillment" (p. 48).

Part of the authors' case seems to me convincing. Alasdair MacIntyre once claimed that Aristotle's ethics depended on an outdated metaphysical biology; and though he has at least in part recanted, others condemn teleology in even stronger terms. In this view, one can speak of functions or goals only for man-made objects. To say that my car has a function makes sense; to aver that I have one does not. Rasmussen and Den Uyl defend their sort of teleology very well. Goal-directed explanation does not refer to mysterious "entelechies" in the style of Hans Driesch nor does this kind of explanation merely play with words, like the dormitive virtue that Molière mocked. Teleology plays a crucial part in biological explanation, and the view that restricts goals to man-made objects should be rejected. Teleology does not belong "with the gorgons and harpies," in McTaggart's phrase.

That said, I am not persuaded that the authors have correctly identified the human natural end. They are entirely correct to note that human beings cannot rely on instinct but must use reason in order to survive. But this does not suffice to show that the goal of reason is to promote individual survival. The authors seem here to assume without argument that all living things, including persons, aim to persist in their being. I do not say that this is false; rather, it does not strike me as self-evidently true. The legitimacy of teleology does not by itself tell us the goal of a particular organism. This requires separate determination.

A return to the example of the heart will clarify this point. If one asks, How do we know the function of the heart? the answer is obvious. Observation of its characteristic activity verifies our account of its goal. But Rasmussen and Den Uyl have themselves pointed out that human reason does not operate in a fixed way. How then can they with such confidence claim that the mind's

freedom of action is bound by the goal they specify? To point to the goals of other animals does not clinch the case: Human beings do not operate on instinct.

I do not claim here that they are wrong about the "properly human end," only that their case is unproven. One further point of clarification is needed. When they speak of survival as a natural end, they mean not bare physical continuation but existence as a rational being. "The cardinal virtue, and that which is the source of all other virtues, is rationality. This involves first and foremost a commitment to the policy of identifying and dealing with the world by means of concepts" (p. 64). Rationality, in turn, must not be misunderstood; "Living rationally or intelligently, is, then, not a single dominant end. It is not a specific end which competes with other ends and is thus judged as having more importance than all other ends. . . . [It] is achieved through specific ends which constitute this way of living" (p. 66).

Suppose that Rasmussen and Den Uyl are entirely correct about the natural end of human beings. What, then, has this to do with morality? Why ought I to follow my natural end? The authors manifest their sure philosophical touch in their awareness of this issue. (I fear, by the way, that not a few of their Randian colleagues fail to realize that the question requires response.) The authors answer that "[t]he demand that we justify the obligatory character of . . . [the statement that 'one ought to live in accordance with the requirements of one's nature'] supposes that something else is required for there to be values that are good. It supposes that this ultimate prescriptive premise is in fact not ultimate. . . . [I]t fails to realize that in ethics, as well as elsewhere, an infinite regress in justifications is not possible, and there must be something ultimate" (p. 49).

This reply relies on a good Aristotelian point, but does not in intention or effect show the correctness of the "prescriptive premise." This the reader must assess for himself. In an effort to assist the reader, the authors provide a supplementary argument. The question, Why should I live in accordance with my natural end? if asked by me, presupposes that I wish to know the answer. If so, then I value knowledge. But if it is "the natural end of a living thing which necessitates and makes possible the existence of values . . . someone could not, therefore, value the answer to this question—the answer *qua* value and *qua* object of choice would not exist—if it were not true that one should live in accord with the requirements of one's nature" (p. 50).

This argument goes astray at its last step. Given the authors' account of value, they say correctly that the value of a response to the question rests on the place of knowledge within the natural end of human beings. Very well, then; if I ask the question then I am in so doing acting in accordance with my natural end. But the question is not: Is it ever permissible for me to act in accordance with my natural end? It is, to reiterate, Why *must* I act in this way? The fact, if fact it be, that I cannot ask the question without acting in accord with my nature

does not show that it is always wrong for me at other times to transgress my nature's requirements. The authors' response assumes the precise point that the inquirer puts in question—the step from natural end to moral ought.

My objection leaves their main thesis intact, however, and they have entirely succeeded in showing that their brand of ethics is a live option. They now confront a serious challenge. Each person must attempt to fulfill the requirements of his or her own nature. Yet the classical liberal society they wish to defend grants each person rights that restrict the actions permissible to others. Further, it is widely assumed that there are moral rights—rights not limited to a particular social order, but rather requirements imposed on us by morality. Do we not wish to say, for example, that Stalin violated the rights of millions of Russians, regardless of the legal status of his regime?

The problem posed to Rasmussen and Den Uyl is this: If I am supposed to fulfill the requirements of my own nature, how do rights enter the scene? If I must act in a certain way to fulfill my nature, this gives me no right to do so. A right imposes duties on others: If I have a right to life, others must not kill me. But my obligation to fulfill my natural end concerns only myself. It is a "person-relative" obligation. In like manner, my obligation to fulfill my nature imposes no duty on me to refrain from interference with others. Why should I care about the efforts at self-fulfillment of other people?

This seems obviously unacceptable: We want a system in which people do respect each other's autonomy. Here, then, is the problem for our authors: How can they reconcile their ethics of individual fulfillment with rights? They begin in a characteristically careful way, with a painstaking analysis of natural rights. The upshot of their discussion is a revolutionary thesis: Natural rights do not directly impose obligations on people. Instead, they delimit the framework of a society that people ought to establish or maintain. If I live in a society in which certain basic rights are respected by most people and enforced against violators, I will be much better able to fulfill my natural end than otherwise. "In our view, something analogous to a category mistake occurs when rights respecting restraint is translated into an interpersonal duty. It is true that one 'ought to respect another's basic right(s),' but the reason that restraint is due is not because of what I owe you, but because of my own principled commitment to human flourishing. That commitment implies standards that define conditions for flourishing in a social and political context" (p. 106).

They term their view "meta-normative": Our obligation is to promote a system in which certain rights are upheld, not to respect these rights directly. In support of their position, they effectively criticize Henry Veatch's attempt to derive natural rights from "duties one naturally owes to oneself" (p. 108). To counter Veatch, they reiterate their key point: "If I have a duty of self-perfection, why are others duty-bound to refrain from interfering with my pursuit of it?" (p. 109)

They seem to me correct, not only in their riposte to Veatch but more generally: An egoistic ethics does not directly impose on people obligations to respect the rights of others. Before embracing their own “meta-normative” doctrine, however, one should be aware of a drastic consequence of it. What happens when one cannot maintain a society of the desired type? It appears that one has no moral obligation to others.

The authors know this full well and point out themselves the limits on respect for rights their position implies: “We may say, then, that when social and political life is not possible, when it is in principle impossible for human beings to live among each other and pursue their well-being, consideration of individual rights is out of place; they do not apply” (p. 146). To our authors, this state of affairs is acceptable; but matters seem to me quite otherwise. I am perfectly at liberty, on this view, to kill people for sport in a non-social situation. All of the worst crimes imaginable have become transformed into morally permissible conduct by the authors’ declaration that it is a “category mistake” to apply rights outside the meta-normative framework. Granted, these crimes cannot plausibly be taken to be required by the pursuit of self-fulfillment; but neither are they forbidden.

The authors maintain that their meta-normative framework justifies rights in all except limited “emergency situations.” Still, the view that moral rights totally lapse in the circumstances not covered by the “meta-normative framework” seems counter-intuitive. If self-fulfillment ethics leads to this consequence, is this not a reason to abandon or limit this sort of ethics? Obviously, Rasmussen and Den Uyl do not think so. If we now ask a further question—Why this difference of opinion?—a basic issue in moral philosophy comes into range.

What is the proper procedure in moral philosophy? In my view, people know various moral truths independently of particular moral theories that philosophers devise. We do not start our philosophizing from scratch but rather must conform our theories to what we know at the outset to be true. In criticizing the meta-normative thesis, I made use of this approach: I questioned the theory because it led to a result that seemed at variance with our pre-theoretical starting point. Rasmussen and Den Uyl approach moral philosophy in an entirely different way. They derive their self-fulfillment view from metaphysical principles and do not test their results by “common-sense” moral principles. To distinguish these two methods is of course not to show that either is correct. But I wish the authors had somewhere addressed this issue.

Before our authors can “square the circle” one more task remains. Their meta-normative principle, if correct, justifies a society with rights. But what sort of rights? To achieve their goal of an Aristotelian defense of classical liberalism, they must show that their principle mandates this type of society. They carry out this mission with great success. According to their theory, “all rights must

be negative. The main reason is, of course, that since rights are meta-normative principles defining the conditions under which further norms and actions can be pursued or followed, they are not thereby conceptual directives to specific obligations. Positive obligations are incurred within the moral territories established by the rights claims" (p. 107). And these are exactly the defining characteristics of a classical liberal society. Rights protect people against forcible interference from others—this is what is meant by the authors' reference to negative rights.

Do the authors succeed in their justification of a classical liberal society? A supreme test for all theories of a free society is the treatment of property rights. Obviously the right to own property is an essential characteristic of a classical liberal society. How, then, is this right derived? In particular, how is property originally acquired? Once original acquisition has been justified, the rest seems easy; owners can sell or give their property to others. In these ways all subsequent acquisition is justified. But that initial step poses the problem—How can someone acquire property if nature is originally unowned?

Rasmussen and Den Uyl identify a fundamental mistake in many discussions of property acquisition. We should not think of property primarily as physical objects but rather as the outcome of human action. "A theory of property rights will . . . concern itself with legitimate exploitation of opportunities not with things or objects. *Ownership* will be the legal expression of the legitimate explanation of opportunities" (p. 117). In other words, property rights are an instance of free action, the right to which the meta-normative framework establishes. When I appropriate unowned property, I deprive no one of resources to which he had a right. Thus I may act as I wish and appropriate the property.

Granted my right to freedom of action, though, why may I "keep the consequences" of my action, namely the physical goods I acquire (p. 120)? The authors provide two responses. First, since the property has been acquired through free action, the burden of proof is on those who challenge the right of acquisition. Opponents must show that one cannot "keep the consequences"; *prima facie*, the right to freedom of action supports the claim that one can. More fundamentally, "human actions which transform the material world . . . can be seen to be nothing less than extensions of self. They make up the life of the person" (p. 127). The physical objects used in this process of self-creation do not exist as resources until a person transforms them. They cannot then be taken away without consent: To do so is an assault on the self.

The key to the authors' theory, then, is that owners create the resources they acquire. Analysis of this position, which has been strongly influenced by Israel Kirzner's account of entrepreneurship (p. 248), would take us too far afield. Given "world enough and time," I should like to discuss a number of other sections

of the book as well, such as the treatment of commercial relationships as Aristotelian “advantage friendships” and the excellent defense of natural-end ethics against G. E. Moore’s “open-question” argument. The reader of *Liberty and Nature* will be continually engaged by the book’s arguments. I do not know whether the authors of this outstanding work of moral philosophy have squared the circle, but they have at least come close.

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Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand. By Leonard Peikoff. New York: Dutton, 1991.

Leonard Peikoff does not hold humility to be a virtue. Still, I was startled to read that “this book is the definitive statement of Ayn Rand’s philosophy—as interpreted by her best student and chosen heir” (p. xv). Peikoff has devoted careful thought to the correct arrangement of topics, so that he can best set forward the systematic nature of Rand’s philosophy. In pursuit of this goal, he has the advantage of thirty years of close association with Miss Rand; in addition, he is himself a professional philosopher. After perusal of the preface, the reader’s enthusiasm can barely be contained.

Objectivism begins with a basic axiom: Existence exists. By this, Rand does not mean that the universal “existence” exists: Rather, “[e]xistence’ here is a collective noun, denoting the sum of existents” (p. 4, parentheses omitted). I do not suppose anyone will quarrel with this; nor does the second axiom, the fact of consciousness, occasion any misgiving. With commendable caution, Peikoff notes that the concept of existence “does not specify that a physical world exists” (p. 5). This seems reasonable: It does not follow from the fact that something exists that any physical objects exist. How one gets from one to the other is precisely the problem posed by Descartes at the beginning of modern philosophy. How does one know that anything besides one’s sense-data and consciousness exists?

Peikoff is guilty of a slight sin of omission, however. Although he does not take the axiom of existence to imply a physical world, he later talks glibly about how perception takes place through the body’s contact with external objects and rejects with contempt any skepticism about the senses. Yet he never offers the slightest argument that the physical world exists. I do not mean to suggest that we need to prove that the physical world exists. It may well be that this is a basic fact that, as G. E. Moore argued, must be accepted without further justification. David Kelley, another philosopher of Randian sympathies, takes

exactly this line in his excellent book *The Evidence of the Senses*.¹ But Peikoff does not adopt this view: He nowhere mentions the existence of the world as a separate principle. How then does it enter the picture?

Peikoff's problems have just begun. One more axiom must be considered: the law of identity, A is A. Peikoff has a remarkable propensity to draw odd conclusions from this uncontestable truth. For one thing, we learn that in "any given set of circumstances . . . there is only one action possible to an entity, the action expressive of its identity. This is the action it will take, the action that is *caused* and necessitated by its nature" (p. 14). But why does Peikoff assume that an entity's nature allows it to perform only one action in given conditions? What if several actions are consistent with the thing's nature? Peikoff himself recognizes the point where human beings are concerned. "The law of causality affirms a necessary connection between entities and their actions. It does not however, specify any particular kind of entity or of action. . . . [It] does not affirm or deny the reality of an irreducible choice" (p. 68). Thus, the law of identity allows only one action in given circumstances, except when Peikoff decides that it does not.

By no means has Peikoff finished with A is A. "As soon as one says about any such [non-man-made] fact: 'It is'—just that much—the whole Objectivist metaphysics is implicit. . . . Such a fact *has to be*; no alternative to it is possible. . . . 'To be,' accordingly, is 'to be necessary'" (p. 24). But even if one grants Peikoff's interpretation of causality, this conclusion does not follow. According to Peikoff, given any (non-made-made) entity, it must act in a certain way. From this, Peikoff concludes that the fact that the entity so acts is necessary. But all that he is entitled to conclude is that *if* the entity in question exists, its action is necessary. Peikoff jumps from this to the claim that the existence of the entity itself is necessary. The earth, by its nature, rotates on its axis. But the fact that on November 22, 1963, the earth rotated on its axis might for all that Peikoff has shown have been false. What if the earth had not existed on that date?

Perhaps in reply Peikoff might claim that the earth exists because of the action of other entities; thus its existence is indeed necessary, since these entities had to act in the way they did. But this simply renews the problem: Did these entities have to exist? And in any event, Peikoff does not claim that every entity is caused to exist. The universe, in particular, has no cause. Why then *must* the entities that form it exist? Peikoff has completely failed to show that "[l]eaving aside the man-made, *nothing is possible except what is actual*" (p. 28).

¹ David Kelley, *The Evidence of the Senses* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1986). See my review in *International Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 28 (September 1988), pp. 337–39. Peikoff does not cite Kelley's work. Since their falling out, Kelley has ceased to exist: No Randian in the apostolic succession may refer to him.

The law of identity has more wonders in store. From it, we know that God does not exist. God is an infinite being, but "[i]nfinite' does not mean large, it means larger than *any* specific quantity, i.e., of no specific quantity. An infinite quantity would be a quantity without identity. But A is A. Every entity, accordingly, is finite" (p. 31). As Duns Scotus pointed out long ago, "infinite" when applied to God is an adverb: It modifies his attributes. If God is infinite in power, for example, his power is such that he can accomplish whatever he wishes that does not violate the laws of logic. But God's power is perfectly definite in character: It is not, as Peikoff thinks, an indefinitely large quantity. To say that God has power over everything is not to say that his power is "without form and void." To make matters worse, Peikoff appeals for support here to Aristotle's argument that the actual infinite does not exist (pp. 31–34). But this argument refers to bodies extended in space and is irrelevant to Peikoff's purpose. As will soon become apparent, the history of philosophy is not one of Peikoff's strong points.

How amazing is that simple principle, A is A! From its study we can derive not only facts about the world but appropriate attitudes toward them. "Metaphysically given facts *are* reality. As such, they are not subject to anyone's appraisal; they must be accepted *without evaluation*. Facts of reality must be greeted not by approval or condemnation, praise or blame, but by a silent nod of acquiescence" (p. 25). Only the man-made can be evaluated; one can, however, evaluate "physical concretes in relation to a human goal" (p. 464, n. 16). I had never before realized how irrational I had been in admiring the Grand Canyon. And when Kant, that fountainhead of evil, said that the starry heavens above filled him with awe, what more might he have said to manifest his disordered mind? How acquiescence is supposed to follow the recognition of necessity, I entirely fail to see. Why should we confine our approval or disapproval to what we can alter?

But I had temporarily forgotten: A is A. To disapprove of what exists is to rewrite reality (p. 27). If, for instance, a skeptic condemns "human knowledge as invalid because it rests on sensory data" (p. 27), he attempts to rewrite reality and has sinned grievously against reason. "But if knowledge does rest on sensory data, then it does so *necessarily*, and again no alternative can even be imagined" (p. 27). Once more Peikoff's point escapes me. The skeptic questions whether sensory data suffice for knowledge of the external world. How does it answer him to say that, necessarily, we rely on the senses? Even if no other model of cognition is imaginable, this hardly shows that the one we have is adequate. If the only way I can cross a ravine is to jump over it, it does not follow that my leap will succeed.

As the last example shows, Objectivists connect very closely metaphysics and the theory of knowledge. The views on the latter subject which Peikoff develops

closely match his exposition of the former, in both content and intellectual quality. A prime concern of Objectivist epistemology is the nature of our concepts. As one would expect from our author, he offers a clear and forthright position. All concepts are integrations of perceptual data, and "there can be no concepts apart from sense experience. There are no innate ideas, ideas in the mind at birth. Consciousness begins as a *tabula rasa* (a blank slate); all of its conceptual content is derived from the evidence of the senses" (p. 38).

As we shall at once see, Rand, and Peikoff following her, have a good deal to say about the way in which we derive concepts. But Peikoff gives no arguments whatever for the position he has just stated. How does he know that innate ideas do not exist? He does not tell us: Perhaps this is supposed to be another corollary of that ubiquitous principle, A is A. I do not contend that we do have innate ideas; rather, it seems to me, theories about the formation of concepts require argument. Peikoff, I gather, dissents.

Putting this issue to one side for a moment, how exactly do Rand and Peikoff think we acquire concepts? We do so by isolating a group of concrete entities and assessing their observed similarities. For example, a "child observes that a match, a pencil, and a stick have a common attribute, length" (p. 83). If the child integrates his observations in the correct way, he will acquire the concept of length.

And how is he to proceed? "Ayn Rand's seminal observation is that the similar concretes integrated by a concept differ from one another only quantitatively, only in the measurements of their characteristics. When we form a concept, therefore, *our mental process consists in retaining the characteristics, but omitting their measurements*" (p. 83). To return to the child confronted by match, pencil, and stick, he must grasp that the objects have different quantities of the same unit in order to acquire the concept of length. This theory strikes me as a poor one. Measurement does not take place in a vacuum: One cannot just measure, but must measure something. And if someone is aware of what he measures, then he already has the concept that Peikoff thinks measurement will disclose to him. What does the child who perceives a quantitative similarity in the three objects take his perception to be of? Length, of course. Measurement presupposes concepts; it does not create them. Further, even if my objection misfires, Peikoff as usual offers no argument to support his view of the way in which concepts are acquired.

Peikoff lives up to the standards readers expect from him in his analysis of the purpose of concepts. Because the human mind is finite, it can grasp at one time only a limited number of units. To cope with large numbers of units, consciousness "must have the capacity to compress its content, i.e., to *economize the units* required to convey that content" (p. 106). The child who has mastered the concept "length" need not keep in mind the dimensions of every object of his acquaintance. He has a means of referring to them all.

At the culmination of concept acquisition stands definition, which "identifies a concept's units by specifying their *essential* characteristics" (p. 97). But even though the definition cannot list all the characteristics of the concept's units, the concept nevertheless refers to all of these. "A concept is *not* interchangeable with its definition—not even if the definition . . . happens to be correct. . . . [A] concept designates existents, including *all their characteristics*, whether definitional or not" (p. 102).

Thus for Peikoff meaning is *pointing*. The concept "red", for example, points to all red objects that exist, and, incredibly, all the characteristics of these objects. I say "incredibly" because each characteristic itself designates all the objects (and their characteristics) to which it applies. By continuing in this way to spell out the entire meaning of a concept, one will fairly quickly arrive at the result that every concept means everything that exists. Part of "red's" meaning is "apple," and since apples grow on trees, then "growing on a tree" becomes part of the meaning of "red." And then each characteristic of "tree" must be added to "red's" meaning and so on through an endless circle.

Peikoff of course would reject my argument. But he does say that "[n]othing is a completely isolated fact, without causes or effects; no aspect of the total can exist alternatively apart from the total. Knowledge, therefore, which seeks to grasp reality, must also be a total; its elements must be interconnected to form a unified whole reflecting the whole which is the universe" (p. 123). If when writing this passage, Peikoff had kept in mind his view of meaning, he would have at once confronted the difficulty just discussed. To reiterate, in Peikoff's view of concepts, each concept will designate everything that exists.²

Fortunately, concept formation is not the sum and substance of the Objectivist theory of knowledge. Peikoff also presents a distinctive account of volition. Commendably, he denies that human beings are inexorably determined by heredity and environment and endorses free choice. He supports a controversial but interesting argument that determinism, the denial of free choice, refutes itself: "When the determinist claims that man is determined, this applies to all man's ideas also, including his own advocacy of determinism. Given the factors operating on him, he believes, he had to become a determinist, just as his opponents had no alternative but to oppose him. How then can he know that his viewpoint is true?" (p. 71). Peikoff fails to mention any of the standard objections to this line of reasoning, which has generated an enormous literature.³

² A further problem for the theory of concepts is this: If concepts are integrations of perceptual knowledge, how can they apply to entities that have not yet been perceived?

³ For a discussion of the argument, see J. M. Boyle, Jr., Germain Grisez, and Olaf Tollefsen, *Free Choice: A Self-Referential Argument* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1976).

But I must not be too critical. Unusually for him, he has arrived at a respectable philosophical argument instead of what I had anticipated: "A is A, therefore we've got free will."

But Peikoff touches no philosophical topic that he does not spoil. According to Objectivism, he states, the "primary choice, . . . the one that makes conceptual activity possible, is the choice to *focus* one's consciousness" (p. 56). By "focusing" he means raising one's level of awareness. Since the choice to focus is basic, it cannot be explained. "[I]t is invalid to ask: why did a man choose to focus? There is no such 'why'. There is only the fact that a man *chose*: [H]e chose the effort of consciousness, or he chose non-effort and unconsciousness" (p. 60). We can exercise rational choice only if we focus; but focusing itself depends on choice. The circle is obvious: One cannot choose a condition that makes choice possible. Unless one were already focused, one could not choose to focus. Or can *this* choice proceed unawares? If so, why not other choices? Nor will it do in response to appeal to the alleged fact that the choice to focus is a "primary." Given the circle, this "reply" merely acknowledges irrationality, rather than attempting seriously to confront it.

Peikoff's problem arises, I am inclined to think, from his unsupported claim that awareness must result from choice. Why must one choose to focus? Perhaps one's state of awareness is determined, for all Peikoff has said to the contrary. His anti-determinist argument does not rule out the possibility. Even if one's awareness is determined, it does not follow that one's thinking, that is, what one does in the state of awareness, is also determined. I do not contend that awareness is determined: This is simply a suggestion as to how the circle can be escaped.

The principles of Objectivist metaphysics and epistemology underlie the most famous part of Rand's philosophy: her egoistic ethics. Here, as always, "A is A" governs. In contrast to irrationalists like David Hume who profess to find a gap between facts and values, "Ayn Rand holds that facts—certain definite facts—do lead logically to values. What 'ought to be' can be validated objectively" (p. 207). This validation depends on the fact that the "realm of existence is the metaphysical fundamental; it is that which every concrete and every issue presupposes. According to Objectivism, this fact has a critical application to the field of values. The alternative of existence or nonexistence is the precondition of all values. If an entity were not confronted by this alternative, it would not pursue goals, not of any kind" (p. 209).

In brief, Peikoff reasons as follows: A value is something that one acts to gain or keep. But only living beings can act. Unless, then, a being confronts the alternative of life or death, it cannot value. No doubt through insufficient grasp of the implications of "A is A", I entirely fail to see how the last step of this argument follows. Granted that one must be alive in order to choose, how does Peikoff obtain that "one must choose to be alive in order to choose?"

Peikoff illustrates his contention with a thought experiment devised by Rand. He asks us to contemplate an “immortal robot . . . not facing the alternative of life or death, [which] requires no action to sustain itself” (p. 209). According to Peikoff, the robot could make no other choices. Pain, intellectual pleasure, and friendship would mean nothing to it, because it need not pursue values in order to exist (pp. 209–11). Unfortunately, Peikoff gives no argument for the conclusion: He simply reiterates his contention for each value he considers in relation to the robot. He has evidently taken to heart Lewis Carroll’s line: “What I tell you three times is true.”

Despite my criticisms of Peikoff, I must acknowledge that with this argument he has made a vital contribution to theology. Many religious believers think that after death they will either enjoy the eternal bliss of heaven or suffer the agonies of everlasting damnation. Thanks to Peikoff, they can end their concern. It does not matter whether one’s destination is heaven or the lower climes. Both states are supposed to last forever: and to a being that cannot again die, nothing can matter. “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire” portends nothing better or worse than “This day shalt thou be with me in Paradise.”

The example of the immortal robot enables Peikoff to “reach the climax of Ayn Rand’s argument. Only the alternative of life vs. death creates the context for value-oriented action, and it does so only if the entity’s end is to preserve its life. By the very nature of ‘value,’ therefore, *any code of values must hold life as the ultimate value*” (p. 212). I once more confess to bafflement. How does Peikoff’s conclusion follow from the “fact” that only beings that face the choice of life or death can pursue values? Why must the necessary condition of value be the ultimate value? Once more, Peikoff offers no argument.

Peikoff devotes a great deal of attention to the Objectivist conception of moral virtue, but as an exercise of mercy (which I, not he, think a virtue), I will pass over this part of the book. Doing so, I regret to say, requires that we refrain from discussion of that fascinating section, “Sex as Metaphysical” (pp. 343–49).

Instead let us turn to Peikoff’s account of capitalism. Here for once he stands on firm ground and makes some excellent, if unoriginal, remarks about the benefits of capitalism and the perils of government interference with the free market. “Because it is the system geared to the requirements of the creative process, capitalism is the system of wealth. It is a system that has no competition at all in regards to the achievement of material abundance—a fact that the enemies of capitalism turn into an objection” (p. 388).

This is well said; but readers who anticipate that Peikoff will drop the ball need not fear disappointment. Peikoff apparently rejects the contention of Austrian economics that economic value is subjective. Quite the contrary, it is objective: “The economic value of goods and services is their *price* . . . and prices on a free market are determined by the law of supply and demand. . . . The market price of a product is determined by the conjunction of two evalua-

tions, i.e., by the voluntary agreement of sellers and buyers" (p. 396). While Peikoff is entirely right that demand and supply determine price, price is not itself a value or preference; it is the outcome of the values that each buyer and seller places on a product. To arrive at his conclusion that economic value is objective, Peikoff has elided the distinction between preferences and their results.

It is hardly surprising that Peikoff prefers his own defense of capitalism to the arguments of other advocates of that system. "As a rule, the defenders of capitalism have been worse—more openly irrational—than its attackers. The man who spread the notion that capitalism means death for the weak was . . . Herbert Spencer; capitalism, he held, permits only the 'survival of the fittest.' This is the conclusion Spencer reached by attempting to deduce capitalism from the intellectuals' fad of the period, Darwin's theory of evolution" (p. 405). These remarks are filled with preposterous errors. Spencer thought that capitalism best promoted the interests of the poor: Peikoff completely misapprehends what Spencer meant by "survival of the fittest." Spencer did not derive his defense of capitalism from Darwin; if anything, Darwin was influenced by him, since Spencer's *Social Statics*, published in 1850, advocated an evolutionary theory nine years before the appearance of *Origin of Species*.

The discussion of Spencer is no aberration. Elsewhere we learn that Objectivists dissent from "the famous and entirely accurate remark made in his later years by John Stuart Mill. . . . 'We are all socialists now'" (p. 394). The "famous and entirely accurate remark" was not made by Mill, but by Sir William Harcourt. The author of *The Ominous Parallels* has not lost his technique.

Whatever the mistakes of the book, however, one finishes it with a feeling of gratitude. Never before have the implications of the law of identity been so thoroughly explored. "A is A" will never be the same again.

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