

# Triumph and Tragedy: how “Optional Values” Undermines Objective Personal Moral Values

By John Yokela and Brishon Martin

“In a deontological [duty-centered] theory, all personal desires are banished from the realm of morality; a personal desire has no moral significance...”[7] Ayn Rand

The concept of “Optional Values” in Objectivist circles publicly emerged in 1983, shortly after Ayn Rand’s death, introducing a philosophical tension that would significantly impact Objectivists approach to morality. This notion, which is conspicuously absent from Rand’s published works, promotes a false dichotomy between universal versus personal moral values. While purporting to protect individual self expression, at the same time maintaining objective moral standards, this framework paradoxically undermines the essence of Rand’s egoistic morality by treating personal values, desires, and choices as outside the moral realm. The resulting contradiction – between treating personal values as optional while simultaneously claiming that ethics should serve as a sufficient guide to individual happiness – represents a foundational flaw that needs resolution.

While attending the first Thomas Jefferson School conference on Objectivism in 1983, the year after Ayn Rand’s death, Brishon first encountered a new doctrine that she never found in any of Rand’s published works: “Optional Values.” This phrase had “gone viral” at this conference. Brishon started thinking about what it really meant. A few months later in January of 1984, a handful of UC Berkeley students, and Brishon, were invited to have dinner with Dr. Leonard Peikoff. He wanted to meet the people who were putting together the first for credit class on Rand’s philosophy in the US college system, which even then was very hostile to Rand. As part of the process of attending this dinner, the attendees were asked to send Peikoff brief bios, career interests, and a list of questions to discuss at this dinner. Brishon asked a question to do with “Optional Values” because she thought it sanctioned subjectivity in the realm of personal moral values. Unfortunately, Peikoff did not address her question. As the use of the term “Optional Values” became more widespread, Brishon kept on persisting in her quest to correct what she regarded as an abnegation of personal moral objectivity.

Objectivism, as interpreted and elaborated on by Peikoff, draws a distinction between universal moral values and “optional” personal values. Although a written argument has never been offered for this position, i.e., this differentiation between personal and universal moral values, it was presumably to counter a personal moral intrinsicism that was once practiced by some “Students of Objectivism.”

According to Objectivism, certain moral principles and virtues and values apply universally to all happiness oriented moral agents. These include the moral values of reason, purpose, and self-esteem; as well as the universal moral disvalues of irrationality, purposelessness, and self-hatred. Objectivism also prescribes universal moral virtues and vices, such as the virtues of rationality, productive work, and pride, and the immorality of irrationality, the initiation of physical force, and self-sacrifice. Rand’s justification for these universal moral values and virtues is based on her metaethical model of the nature of man as a rational animal (we will provide a

more essentialized definition of man in our upcoming paper), whose physical survival (a pulse) depends on reason and the productive achievement it enables. Rand held that universal moral values are necessary for all moral agents who choose happiness as their highest moral purpose, and that morality is a necessary and sufficient guide to happiness. Universal moral values are to be achieved by engaging in moral virtues.

Obviously, one's choice of productive career is going to impact one's happiness, yet, according to Peikoff's idea of "Optional Values," this personal value judgment is outside the moral realm. Objectivists are encouraged not to morally judge themselves, or others, in regard to their personal value choices. They are to limit their moral judgments to whether or not they violate universal moral standards — not personal standards — which are supposedly morally optional. We get moral credit for choosing productive work *in general* but not for choosing the *particular* productive work we love, e.g., architecture, writing, programming, etc.

Only a few lectures can be found in the Objectivist corpus offering extended advice on how to choose one's "Optional Values." Strangely, in Peikoff's lectures on this, he frequently uses moral verbiage to impart his advice with words like "must," "should," "need to," etc. Yet, Peikoff told John that the advice in his lecture, "*Judging, Feeling, and Not Being Moralistic*" was *not* meant as moral advice. Another source of advice in this realm is Tara Smith's talk on applying Objectivity in Everyday Life. Smith's advice is applicable only with respect to epistemological objectivity, however, and, just like Peikoff's advice, does not make personal desires any part of the standard of objective *moral evaluation*.

Not only is this model embraced by the top Objectivist intellectuals, but also in common usage and understanding, Objectivists contend that personal values are morally optional. When this point is addressed, it is typically asserted that because one cannot reasonably claim that X career, or X romantic partner, are good for *all* men, then it follows that there is no objective moral standard involved in these personal choices. This division amounts to a false alternative where on the one side is the universal objective moral realm, and on the other is the personal, subjective morally optional realm. This would give moral credit to Howard Roark for choosing a productive career because it helps him survive; but no moral credit for his choice to be an architect because he passionately loves it. Likewise it would give Peter Keating moral credit for choosing a productive career, but withhold moral blame from him for choosing to be an architect despite the fact he doesn't love it. These personal choices affect both character's happiness, but the doctrine of "Optional Values" puts these choices outside the moral realm. This is an untenable position for an egoistic ethics that seeks to be a sufficient guide to happiness. So why is it advocated?

There was a time when "Students of Objectivism" adopted Rand's personal value standards as their own, e.g., her love of certain music, skyscrapers and Roark's orange hair, which amounted to a kind of personal moral intrinsicism. But without an objective personal moral standard, this phenomenon would be a predictable consequence for those interested in Objectivism. What people needed was an understanding of how to develop objective personal moral standards. What they got, however, was the ejection of personal standards, or desires, from the moral realm, setting up this moral-personal dichotomy.

As well intended as the idea of “Optional Values” may have been to ward off an intrinsic negative moralism, what has resulted in an unrecognized lacuna in the Objectivist ethics, and an Objectivist movement that is consequently stunted and splintered. We contend that this is one very important reason why Objectivism is not spreading throughout Western culture. In its present state Objectivism has no theory of objective personal moral values, (nor virtues and standards). This is a foundational breach for an objective egoistic ethics that aims to be a sufficient guide to happiness. A more personal egoistic approach is needed, while maintaining objective moral standards, and allowing for niche differences in each individual’s nature.

To our knowledge, no one has asserted that happiness can be achieved without alignment between one’s chosen purposes (like career and romantic love) and one’s personal desires. We must desire our purposes in life to feel satisfaction and joy in achieving them. But the various factions disagree on the moral status of such affects. Survivalists and Flourishers agree that an objective morality is not a sufficient guide to happiness, but they disagree on what to do about it. Flourishers will hold that morality must be a sufficient guide to happiness (flourishing) and personal desires are necessary guides, but they are subjective, therefore, for them morality is at least partly subjective. Survivalists contend morality is a guide to life (literal physical survival, i.e., a pulse) and is not a sufficient guide to happiness (which may come from the field of psychology, they contend). Syncretists claim morality is a sufficient guide to happiness, but that personal desires are not needed as guides to one’s purposes and actions because the alignment with one’s desires is automatic. It is to be achieved by a rational calculation conditioning one’s personal desires. We don’t choose our career because we desire it; we desire it because we rationally judge it as good for us — and our desire for it follows like exhaust out of the tailpipe of a car. Their motto is “think right to feel right.”[1]

Clearly, Rand’s own moral judgment was that Keating’s choice of architecture was immoral, in part, because it *was not* his own personal passion; and Roark’s choice of architecture was moral, in part, because it *was* his personal passion. Personal desires were part of the standard of moral judgment Rand used — and not just in fiction. Rand’s use of personal desires as part of a personal moral standard extends to non-fiction in her article “*Art and Moral Treason*,” (The Romantic Manifesto). Rand judged as “moral treason” two men’s failure to pursue the enjoyment of the art they loved most. Recall Reardon’s passion for Dagny — even against his rational judgment — led him to start an affair with her. An extended section of Reardon’s story delves into his process of coming to validate this moral choice. Furthermore, in “*Art and Moral Treason*” Rand explicitly criticized the Kantian duty ethics for ***excluding personal desires from the moral realm: “In a deontological [duty-centered] theory, all personal desires are banished from the realm of morality; a personal desire has no moral significance...”***[7] Yet, there is no corresponding ethical theory to support Rand’s judgement of these men; in other words, these moral judgments can not be made based on principles from Rand’s Objectivist Ethics. So we see Rand and the heroes in her novels are guided by their personal desires and passions with respect to career and romance, etc. — and Rand approved.

In contradiction to this article and to the morality practiced by her characters, Rand wrote “In choosing his goals (the specific values he seeks to gain and/or keep), a rational man is guided by his thinking (by a process of reason)—not by his feelings or desires. He does not regard desires as irreducible primaries, as the given, which he is destined irresistibly to pursue. He does not regard “because I want it” or “because I feel like it” as a sufficient cause and validation of his

actions. He chooses and/or identifies his desires by a process of reason, and he does not act to achieve a desire until and unless he is able rationally to validate it in the full context of his knowledge and of his other values and goals. He does not act until he is able to say: “I want it because it is right.”[2].

In fact, Rand is adamant, at times, and determined to avoid moral subjectivism: “Desires (or feelings or emotions or wishes or whims) are not tools of cognition; they are not a valid standard of value, nor a valid criterion of man’s interests. The 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.”[3].

In the Objectivist Ethics, Rand advocates no guidance role for emotions: “*The virtue of Rationality means the recognition and acceptance of reason as one’s only source of knowledge, one’s only judge of values and one’s only guide to action.*”[4] Giving support to the Syncretists with quotes like this, Rand treats emotions as morally epiphenomenal, i.e., just a consequence of but not properly a guide to moral evaluations, choices and actions.

Adopting Rand’s personal value standards and “Optional Values” are two sides of the same coin — a false alternative between an intrinsic versus a subjective approach to the relation of personal desires to morality.

Despite her being muddled in her argumentation, Rand is aiming for an objective morality that is a sufficient guide to happiness. She is equivocal on how the needed personal desires come to be aligned with the good, the ethical, the moral. If a morality is to be a sufficient guide to happiness, personal desires must have a guidance role. If morality is to be objective, personal desires can’t be part of the standard of value. This is the reasoning: since emotions are not tools of cognition (we agree), if values are merely cognition — “*evaluative ideas*” as Peikoff[5] and David Kelley[6] both assert, (we disagree); then making an affect/emotion part of the standard of moral judgment makes it non-objective. There is a contradiction between Rand’s fiction plus “*Art and Moral Treason*” on the one hand; versus the *Objectivist Ethics*, *OPAR*, and other Objectivist intellectual’s work, on the other hand. This stance creates a dilemma for a happiness-oriented, objective, benevolent, egoistic ethics, when it comes to the guidance of personal desires. *The dilemma facing Objectivists with respect to personal desires influencing one’s evaluations, choices and actions, is this: You can’t be objective with them; you can’t get happy without them.* What’s a philosopher to do?

Overall, we believe Rand was on the right track with a ***happiness-oriented, objective, benevolent, egoistic morality***, but she went off track with the assumption that moral objectivity is merely a type or species of epistemological objectivity; that objective moral evaluation is a type of reasoning; that moral values are a type of truth; and the objective moral standard is knowledge of the requirements of man’s life qua rational animal. This follows from her view of man as rational animal, whose basic means of survival is his rational faculty. These ideas we contend are mistaken and lead to systemic contradictions in Rand’s Objectivist Ethics.

We contend that there is a solution to this conundrum faced by the Objectivist Ethics. We can avoid the intrinsic-subjective false dichotomy with respect to personal desires. There is the possibility of an epistemologically ***and morally*** objective ethics describing a happiness-oriented objective, egoistic morality that is a necessary and sufficient guide to happiness.

Peikoff was once asked why Aristotle's ethics did not spread and win out over Plato's, which spread like wildfire. Peikoff's answer was that Aristotle's ethics was not practicable for the average man. Ironically and tragically the same fate has befallen serious intellectuals attracted to Rand's ethics. Making reason one's "*only judge of values and only guide to action*," as Rand suggests, rejecting the guidance role of personal desires, or keeping them outside of morality, is not a practical means for anyone to achieve happiness.

There are indeed those who love Rand's fiction and who are happy enough, but who don't take her ethical ideas too seriously. We wish you well. If you are one of "*The New Intellectual[s]*" who admire Rand's work; who take ethics seriously; who can recognize some contradictions in the Objectivist Ethics; and who would love to see an ethics that truly aligns with a *happiness-oriented, objective, benevolent, egoistic, morality*. We invite you to connect with us at [substack.com/@johnyokela](http://substack.com/@johnyokela) or [brishon.com](http://brishon.com).

#### Endnotes

[1] Triumph and Tragedy, The Morality of Ayn Rand versus the Objectivist Ethics by John Yokela and Brishon Martin, Appendix 1

[2] 46-47, The "Conflicts" of Men's Interests" by Ayn Rand – *The Virtue of Selfishness*

[3] 46, The "Conflicts" of Men's Interests" by Ayn Rand – *The Virtue of Selfishness*

[4] The Objectivist Ethics, by Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*

[5] "The good, therefore, is a species of the true; it is a form of recognizing reality.... The evil is a species of the false; it is a form of contradicting reality." *Fact and Value*, Leonard Peikoff

[6] [David] Kelley further states, "I do not accept any dichotomy between fact and value, or between cognition and evaluation. On the contrary, I hold that values are a species of facts, evaluation a species of cognition".

[7] Ayn Rand, Philosophy Who Needs It, Causality vs Duty, 97.