Problematic Arguments in Randian Ethics

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I. Introduction

This essay began as a critical discussion of Craig Biddle's *Loving Life: The Morality of Self-Interest and the Facts that Support It* (2002). It has, however, grown beyond that. My original intention was to describe and criticize some of the key arguments offered in Biddle's primer in Randian ethics. I formed the intention to offer that description and criticism because Biddle's argumentation will be recognized by readers of this journal as reflective of a great deal of Rand's own argumentation in ethics. Hence, for those readers, this description and criticism would serve a double purpose. First, it would provide a useful critical analysis of Biddle's competent and systematic presentation of Rand's ethical thought. Second and more importantly, it would—albeit indirectly—provide a much needed general critical analysis of Randian arguments in ethics. The original plan was to employ Biddle's *Loving Life* as the basis for this indirect critique of arguments that readers would surely recognize as having their source in Rand.

However, as the scope of my analysis and critique of Biddle's argumentation has expanded, it has seemed less and less reasonable for me to expect my readers to draw the conclusion that my expanded critique applies also to Rand's own writings unless I myself directly examine those writings. Nevertheless, I have not taken up the task of providing a detailed comprehensive examination of Rand's own arguments in ethics. One reason for this is that I am not claiming that every defective argument in Biddle has some particular

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discrete source in Rand’s writings. A second reason is that it is pretty obvious that Rand does make many of the arguments for which I criticize Biddle. The third and most important reason is that there is a golden mean between my leaving it entirely to the readers of this essay to apply my criticisms of Biddle to Rand herself and my taking on the burden of tracing all or nearly all of Biddle’s defective arguments to some Randian text.

Let me explain what that golden mean is. The most systematic and sustained criticism that I make of Biddle’s reasoning involves my delineation and ascription to Biddle of a series of defective argumentative moves, which I group together under the label “the Shuffle.” Relatedly, my most serious and sustained charge against Rand’s own reasoning in ethics is that she pervasively commits the Shuffle in the course of her arguments about what is required for human survival. The golden mean between leaving it to this essay’s readers to apply all of my critique of Biddle to Rand and my tracing all or nearly all of Biddle’s defective arguments to some Randian text is my going to Rand’s text to vindicate this most serious and sustained charge, viz., that Rand herself pervasively perpetrates the Shuffle. The original plan for this essay has been revised so as to incorporate this golden mean.

Indeed, I end up devoting six central sections of this paper’s fourteen sections to the Shuffle. In these sections (sections VII–XII), I explain what the Shuffle is, show the Shuffle at work in Biddle, anticipate where it is likely to be found in Rand’s “The Objectivist Ethics,” and show that it is found there. I expect that some readers will think that, when I finally get to it in sections XI and XII, I go overboard in my detailed examination of Rand’s text. I certainly dwell upon the Shuffle and its manifestations. I do so because I believe the Shuffle is deeply ingrained with Randian argumentation in ethics. One must dwell upon it to dispel it. In the course of dwelling upon the steps that add up to the Shuffle in Rand, I offer what I hope are some nonstandard insights into Rand’s ethical reasoning. For instance, in section XI, I offer an account of how Rand’s well-known move to the ultimate value of “man’s survival qua man” (Rand 1964, 23) is supposed to work.

Sections II, VI, and XIII deal with other intellectual vices that appear in Biddle’s Loving Life—for most of which Rand will be recognized as the source. Section III reports on a virtue in Loving Life, viz., Biddle’s presentation of Rand’s crucial argument for there being an essential connection between valuing and life such that life is established as man’s ultimate value. In sections III, IV, and V, I applaud Biddle’s recognition of the importance and anti-subjectivist significance of Rand’s foundational argument for the ultimate value of life. I offer suggestions about how Rand’s crucial meta-ethical insight might have been better articulated and developed, and I describe how Biddle himself quickly loses sight of the crucial anti-subjectivist significance of Rand’s metaethical insights. One of my points about how Rand’s crucial metaethical argument might have been better articulated and developed concerns the conclusion that Rand should have drawn in this argument. I maintain (in section IV) that Rand should have concluded, not that each individual’s survival is the ultimate value, but rather that each individual’s well-being is the ultimate value. If Rand had drawn this different conclusion, the need to turn to the defective arguments that make up the Shuffle would not have arisen. Thus, this essay provides both an analysis and critique of this pervasive argumentative flaw in Randian reasoning and an account of how Rand could have avoided traveling down that crooked path. Finally, I should add that in focusing on describing and criticizing the Shuffle, my examination has taken more of a methodological turn than I had first expected it to take. In this way, also, although this essay is considerably less than a systematic survey of possible problems within Randian arguments in ethics, it is considerably more than a report on idiosyncratic vices within Biddle’s book.

Before proceeding further, I should state for the record my own overall view of Rand as an ethical thinker. I think that Rand has offered us some very deep ethical insights, e.g., about the essential relationship between valuing and the human good and about the relationship of affirming the ultimate separate value of each individual’s good and affirming each individual’s possession of moral rights. Beyond that, Rand is simply without peer as an insightful, powerful,
and heroic ethical crusader on behalf of individualism, individual freedom, and a free social and economic order. Unfortunately, I also think that line-by-line many of Rand’s ethical arguments are just awful. It is not merely that she does not bother with fine distinctions and academic niceties. Rather, her arguments all too often consist of gross misrepresentations of her opponents’s views, conflations of importantly distinct doctrines, crucial equivocations, and massive beggings of the question at hand. And the awfulness of these arguments is compounded by the arrogance, contempt, and hostility with which they are usually expressed. What some readers will see as my too lengthy and picky examination of Rand’s text in sections XI and XII, I see as fulfillment of the intellectual obligation I have incurred in saying that line-by-line much of Rand’s argumentation is awful.

As long as those who appreciate Rand’s deep insights and who want to sustain and expand her ethical crusade do not break free of these really bad arguments and their characteristic tone, they will fail in their own attempts to make Rand’s insights and crusade attractive to a wider, intellectually discriminating, audience. This discussion is motivated by a desire to save Rand’s deep ethical insights and the credibility of her crusade from Rand’s own line-by-line argumentation. Biddle’s book provides an occasion for initiating this rescue operation.

II. Philosophical Misdescription

One of the major defects in Rand’s ethical expositions is antecedent to her arguments per se. It consists in her frequent misdescription of the targets of her criticism and her conflation of distinct philosophical stances under a single label. In *Loving Life*, Biddle follows suit. Although some of the defects of Biddle’s exposition are not of the first order of importance, their presence is a sign of more intellectual carelessness to come.

Rand attacked subjectivism without ever distinguishing between the different things that philosophers call “subjectivism.” For instance, in one sense, subjectivism is the doctrine that moral utterances are merely expressions of the speaker’s attitudes. In this first sense, subjectivism denies that there are any genuine ultimate goods—though not that people have motivationally ultimate ends. In a second sense, subjectivism is the doctrine that an agent’s ultimate favorable attitude toward some object makes that object an ultimate good (for that agent); basic preferences confer ultimate goodness upon their objects. In his initial chapter on subjectivism, Biddle talks about two specific versions of subjectivism in this second sense. One version is the view that whatever God wills is good in virtue of God’s willing it. The second version is the view that whatever society wills is good in virtue of society’s willing it. However, Biddle then conflates the first of these subjectivist views with the substantive moral position that everyone should sacrifice for the sake of God. And he conflates the second of these subjectivist views with the substantive moral position that everyone should sacrifice for the sake of society. In the resulting confusion, he thinks that objections to the substantive moral position that everyone should sacrifice for God are objections to the subjectivist view that whatever God wills is good. And he thinks that objections to the substantive moral position that everyone should sacrifice for society are objections to the subjectivist view that whatever society wills is good.

Moreover, Biddle follows Rand’s rhetorical suggestion that “subjectivists” hold that *all* decisions are a matter of feelings—that, whenever a choice is to be made, the right choice is the choice one feels like making. According to Biddle (2002), subjectivists hold that “one should disregard everything one knows to be true and act solely according to one’s unfettered desires or the norms of one’s tribe” (38). This, of course, is a major distortion. Roughly speaking, subjectivism holds that one’s *ultimate ends* (and/or the goodness of those ends) are a function of one’s nonrational ultimate attitudes. But, given those ends, one can—and ought to—rationally assess alternative courses of action in terms of how well they serve those ends. That is part of what Hume meant when he said that *raison*—not “unfettered desire”—is the slave of the passions. And that is why Hume’s famous remark cannot support Biddle’s remarkable claim that “David Hume was as explicit about his hatred of reason as he
was about his love of feelings” (40). Hume may well have been wrong about the silence of reason vis-a-vis ultimate ends. But Biddle’s remark reveals colossal ignorance about a man who, e.g., articulated a powerful theory about the rationality of compliance with principles of justice and who, throughout his life, strove to advance a secular, religion-free defense of commercial society. Biddle’s linkage of Hume to Hitler (41) replicates the lowest moments of Randian rhetoric.

Rand (1964, 30) also tends to conflate subjectivism and hedonism. Biddle (2002, 12) follows suit by declaring: “The most common form of personal subjectivism is: hedonism.” Yet, many ethical hedonists are moral objectivists both in the sense that they believe that it is true that pleasure is the ultimate good and in the sense that they believe that the goodness of pleasure does not obtain merely in virtue of pleasure being desired. Rand condemned Kant; so Biddle feels that somewhere he must also do so. He does this by declaring Kant to have been the “father” of “social subjectivism” which, in the relevant paragraph, is characterized as “the notion that truth and morality are the creations of the mind of a collective (a group of people)—or matters of social convention” (7). Now there is a sense in which the mind, as reason, does have primacy in Kantian metaphysics and ethics. But this primacy of mind as reason is a long way from the subjectivism that Biddle has targeted—in which the notion of arbitrary, nonrational will is paramount. Whatever the ultimate philosophical errors of Kant, it is a canard to accuse him of advocating the primacy of arbitrary will in metaphysics or ethics.

These are just samples that point to three interconnected features present in much Randian writing. The first is enormous ignorance about the actual views of the thinkers discussed—especially the views of those on Rand’s philosophical enemies list. The second is an inclination to conflate into one strawman many distinct views, so that these views can all be tarred with the same broad brush. The third is a tendency to cast all opposing views in their most unfavorable light—as views that only an idiot or moral monster would advocate. Clearly this tendency greatly facilitates and is greatly facilitated by ignorance about what those on the enemies list have actually said and the conflation of actually distinct views into a few simple targets for which there are well-rehearsed pat refutations.

What is striking is the extent to which these features infect *Loving Life*, even though (I surmise) it is a good-willed attempt by an able author to provide readers with an attractive introduction to Randian thought. What is it about the content or tone of Rand that leads so many of those who are struck by the power and incisiveness of her vision to replicate in themselves Rand’s own intellectual vices? Perhaps part of the explanation is the extent to which Rand embeds her important insights within her own substantially self-fulfilling vision of the world as divided into the forces of light and the forces of darkness—forces of darkness which, despite her professions to the contrary, she perceives as insidious, pervasive, and powerful. Rand’s insights are thereby garrisoned within a fortress mentality that requires unrelenting isolation from and hostility toward the monstrous enemies at the gate.

III. Biddle’s Recognition of Rand’s Crucial, Anti-Subjectivist Metaethical Insight

Let me turn now to the one virtue within the argumentative structure of *Loving Life*. This virtue corresponds to Rand’s single most important contribution to moral thought. This is her claim, as I would put it, that the phenomenon of valuing exists for the sake of the life of the valuing being; and, hence, that good valuing is valuing that actually promotes (or is likely to promote) the life of the valuing entity. Biddle recognizes that, if one wants to reject subjectivism—in, e.g., the two senses described above—one must affirm the objective value of some ultimate end. And if one is to affirm the objective value of some ultimate end, one needs an explanation for why that end is ultimately valuable. Moreover, Biddle recognizes that Rand’s claim about the essential connection between valuing and life is the core of an argument for the ultimate value of the end which is life. Biddle correctly sees that a thorough enough rejection of subjectivism requires some sort of bridging of the (alleged) gap between facts and values, i.e., between descriptive “is” propositions
and normative “ought” propositions. And Biddle correctly sees Rand’s remarks about the special and hitherto unappreciated relation between, on the one hand, values and the concept of value and, on the other hand, life and the concept of life as a profound contribution on Rand’s part to the bridging of the (alleged) fact-value gap. Unfortunately, Biddle does not go much beyond asserting that Rand’s claim refutes those who insist upon a gap between “is” and “ought.” He never seeks to explain to the reader who has taken note of the alleged gap between factual and normative claims how Rand’s remarks undermine the idea of a sharp cleavage between factual claims and normative claims. He never seeks to explain what precisely fills the apparent gap.

Biddle quotes Rand’s two most crucial statements. The first is, “It is only the concept of ‘Life’ that makes the concept of ‘Value’ possible” (Rand 1964, 15–16, 17). The second is: “[T]he fact that living entities exist and function necessitates the existence of values and of an ultimate value which for any given living entity is its own life” (18). The first statement is about the relation between the concept of life and the concept of value; and that relation is the relation of one thing making another thing possible. The second statement is about the relation of the existence of life and the existence of value; and that relation is the relation of one thing necessitating another thing. What are we to make of this? Surely Rand must mean something more than (1) a living thing’s existence makes it causally possible that it will pursue something and/or (2) a living thing’s existence causally necessitates that it will pursue something. For even the conjunction of (1) and (2) merely amounts to the claim that each living thing can pursue some ends and cannot avoid pursuing some ends. And this claim does not help us get over or fill in the (alleged) gap between facts and values. It would be getting closer to the mark to say that Rand is asserting—especially via her claims about the relation among the concepts of value and life—that there is some sort of essential connection between life and value. This also seems to be what Rand has in mind when she says: “Epistemologically, the concept of ‘value’ is genetically dependent upon and derived from the antecedent conception of ‘life’” (17). But what is the character of that “genetic” dependence?

Rand’s claims—including her claims about the place of goals and goal-directed action in the existence of sub-human living things—point to the idea that the phenomenon of values can only be adequately understood as something that exists for the sake of the life of the value-pursuing entity. She is saying, I think, that what values are about—or, I think it is better to say, what valuing, i.e., identifying, adopting, and/or pursuing goals is about—is the sustenance of the life of the valuing entity. What is meant here is not that all instances of valuing are instances of an entity’s pursuing what in fact sustains its life (or even pursuing what is intended or is likely to sustain its life). Rather, what is meant is that the function of values—or better yet, the function of valuing—is the sustenance of the life of the valuing entity. One does not truly understand what valuing is unless one sees that valuing is about, i.e., exists for the sake of, sustaining the life of the valuing entity.

This claim about what valuing exists for the sake of is like the claim that hearts exist for the sake of getting oxygen and nutrients to the cells of the beings which have hearts. There is, of course, no implication here that hearts or valuing were purposively created in order to promote the end of oxygen and nutrients getting to cells or the end of living entities remaining alive. The idea—if we are working out Rand’s insight along the lines suggested here—is that we can identify the function of valuing. A phenomenon’s function is to perform in a way that fulfills the need which explains the existence of that phenomenon. Thus, hearts have the function of delivering oxygen and nutrients to the cells of the organisms with hearts—since the need of those organisms for the delivery of oxygen and nutrients to their cells explains the existence of their hearts. The crucial passages in Rand point to—but do not explicitly arrive at—a parallel claim about valuing having the function of fulfilling the need of an organism to achieve and sustain certain specific conditions and circumstances if it is to remain a living organism of its kind. Life, because of its highly conditional character, necessitates the existence of valuing in the sense that valuing must exist (must come into
existence) if the need of living things to attain or maintain the special conditions or circumstances of their continued existence is to obtain.

Given this understanding of the relation between the phenomenon of life and the phenomenon of valuing, viz., that valuing is for the sake of life, we see that it is essential to the concept of valuing that valuing is for the sake of, i.e., has the function of promoting, life. This reading allows us to understand the relation between Rand’s two crucial statements; it is because “the fact that living entities exist and function necessitates the existence of values...” that “[i]t is only the concept of ‘Life’ that makes the concept of ‘Value’ possible.” That is, since life requires valuing (if it is to remain in existence as life) and because this requiring of valuing explains the existence of value (Rand’s first claim), the concept of life is essentially connected to the concept of value—I prefer to say “valuing”—in the specific sense that valuing is for the sake of life (Rand’s second claim).

This sort of explication of Rand’s core insight reveals why the idea of there being a sharp cleavage between factual claims and normative claims is mistaken. It thus reveals why it is possible to move from claims that are classified as “factual” to claims that are classified as “normative.” What bridges or fills in the alleged gap are truths about the functions of certain kinds of phenomena. Truths about the function of a kind of phenomenon are located nicely within the supposed gap between the descriptive and the prescriptive. For instance, that hearts have a certain function is a “factual” claim about hearts. One knows more about what hearts factually are when one knows that their function is to deliver oxygen and nutrients to an organism’s cells. But claims about the function of a given type of thing also ground evaluations of things of that type and of actions of things of that type. For instance, our claim about the function of hearts grounds evaluations of certain hearts as good hearts and other hearts as bad hearts and of certain performances of hearts as good heart performances and other performances of hearts as bad heart performances. In parallel fashion, an understanding of the function of valuing, i.e., of identifying, adopting, and/or pursuing goals, grounds evaluations of valuing. Good valuing is valuing that promotes life; bad valuing is valuing that fails to promote life.

What I have presented here is a brief statement of my best understanding of Rand’s basic metaethical insight. Others may have different friendly explications. As I have said, it would be too much to expect a primer such as Biddle’s to delve deeply into these difficult issues. But one would like, even in a primer, to see more than a juggling of Rand’s phrases. One would like to see some level of inquiry into what those phrases might mean and how they—perhaps along with additional, unrecognized premises—add up to an enlightening and perhaps even complete philosophical argument. Such a philosophical exposition requires enough understanding of philosophical argumentation to recognize the difference between suggestive remarks and relatively complete philosophical arguments.

IV. Ultimate Value: The Well-Being Not the Life of the Agent

I have offered a friendly exposition of Rand’s key claim that the standard for any living entity’s valuing is the maintenance of the life of that entity and, hence, that the life of that entity is what has ultimate value for that entity. However, I actually think that only a more general claim is correct. That more general claim is that, for any given living entity, what has ultimate value is the good (well-being) of that entity. As I am reading Rand, she is saying that it is the conditionality of a living entity’s life that necessitates the phenomenon of valuing and, for this reason, the function of valuing in a given entity is the attainment and maintenance of its life. My suggestion is that we should, instead, say that it is the conditionality of a living entity’s good that necessitates the phenomenon of valuing and, for this reason, the function of valuing in a given entity is the attainment and maintenance of its good. It may be that for some living entities, the ultimate good is limited to its attaining and maintaining its life. This seems plausible in the case of plants. And, if it were true that, for all kinds of living entities, the good of an entity of that kind consists only in the attainment and maintenance of the life of that entity, then my proposed substitution would make no effective difference.

However, as soon as we move from plants to living entities who
problem within Randian ethics to reconcile Rand’s metaethical claim that the ultimate good is life as starkly contrasted with death with the view of the human good embedded in her novels.

How can Rand or any Randian who shares this metaethical stance move to the sort of ethics of human well-being that is exemplified in the lives and choices of her fictional heroes? There are essentially two possible routes. Rand and her fellow-travelers can maintain that the ultimate end of survival is not really what it first seems to be. Rather, we discover on reflection that human survival is “man’s survival qua man” (23) and that “man’s survival qua man” is nothing but a life in which those dimensions of human well-being are achieved and sustained. This route is, in essence, what I shall later describe as the conceptual defense of the claim: that survival requires reason, productivity, non-parasitism, honesty, resolve, and so on. The other strategic route is to argue that the Randian virtues are not part of man’s ultimate good; rather, these virtues are the causally required means for the attainment of survival, the required means for the maximal avoidance of death. This route is, in essence, what I shall later describe as the causal defense of the claim that survival requires reason, productivity, non-parasitism, honesty, resolve, and so on. Neither of these avenues of escape from conceiving of the ultimate human good as staying alive is going to work. And, as we shall see, the Shuffle consists largely of shifting back and forth between these two avenues of escape as one or the other becomes too obviously inadequate. The point I want to make in this section, however, is that the need for escape from an at least apparently too narrow, too stark conception of the ultimate human good would not arise in the first place were we to see the basic argument about the function of valuing as yielding the conclusion that the function of valuing is to attain the valuing entity’s well-being rather than the conclusion that the function of valuing is the attainment of the valuing entity’s survival.

V. Biddle’s Unknowing Turn to Subjectivism

I have applauded the fact that in Loving Life Biddle recognizes
that a Randian rejection of subjectivism requires an argument for the objective goodness of some ultimate end. It is most unfortunate, therefore, that Biddle contravenes his own objectivism with his repeated claim that the ultimate value of life is chosen. In standard Randian fashion, Biddle thinks that our possible ultimate goals are limited to "life" and "death." However, when Biddle says that the value of life is chosen, he is not merely making the innocuous claim that whether one has life as one's ultimate goal or death as one's ultimate goal depends in fact on which of those ends one has chosen to pursue (or allow to occur). Rather, Biddle's claim is the subjectivist claim that it is an agent's actual choice of life as his ultimate goal that makes his life ultimately valuable.

Biddle (2002, 47) tells us that a person's "choice to remain alive establishes his life as his ultimate good" (emphasis added). He tells us that "[m]orality is chosen—all the way down to one's standard of value. A person's choice to remain alive makes his life his ultimate value and thus gives rise to his need of morality" (49; emphasis mine on "makes"). "If he chooses to live, then his life is his ultimate value ..." (50; emphasis mine on "if, then"). A person's choice of life as his ultimate value is, on this view, not itself justified by anything that choice must in itself be viewed as purely arbitrary—as a pure act of subjective will. Thus, in asserting that the choice to remain alive establishes that agent's life as an ultimate good for that agent, Biddle is adopting the version of subjectivism which says that one's ultimate affections make the objects of those affections ultimately valuable.

Biddle here has forgotten the sound points he previously made against this sort of subjectivism. Previously, he considered the following proposal for grounding normative judgments: "Pick a goal, determine what you have to do in order to accomplish it—and there's your 'ought.'" To this proposal, Biddle responded:

But not so fast. The moral question is: How does one choose a proper goal. . . . Logically, morality cannot be a matter of achieving arbitrary goals or ends. If the moral ends are arbitrary, there would be no such thing as "good" and "evil": there would only be "works" and "doesn't work." . . . If we are to establish an objective fact-based morality, we have to discover a final end—one toward which all of our other goals and values are properly aimed. (35–36)

The crucial word here is "discover." In any objectivist morality, ultimate values (or principles) have to be understood as discovered, they are properly chosen if and only if they have been discovered.

How can Biddle miss the fact that he has contravened his own earlier sound anti-subjectivism? I suspect we see here a consequence of Biddle's even earlier mischaracterization of subjectivism. According to that mischaracterization, subjectivism is the view that the right action is always the action one feels like doing. Biddle recognizes that even after he has adopted the doctrine that the ultimate value of life is established by one's choice of life, he can still hold that reason must be consulted to determine what specific courses of action will serve the goal of life. As he puts it: "If he chooses to continue living, reality (what it is) dictates what he ought to do" (47). Since Biddle sees that he has not adopted the position that the right action is always the action one feels like doing, he thinks that he has not adopted subjectivism. But, given Biddle's mischaracterization, Hume also is not subjectivist. After all, as we saw, Hume held that reason has a role to play. Its role is to be a slave to the passions; the passions give us ultimate ends but then reason tells us how best to achieve those ends. But, of course, Hume is a subjectivist—precisely because he held that our ultimate ends are determined by our affections, not by reason. That is precisely the position Biddle himself comes to by adopting the choice doctrine.17

VI. Philosophical Inattentiveness

Biddle accurately follows Rand's insistence that her key claims about the relations between "Life" and "Value" yield the conclusion that each living entity's ultimate value is the survival of that entity.18 This insistence on Rand's part raises the most obvious and commonly posed questions about her ethical doctrine. Is it really survival and survival alone that is the ultimate good for each living entity? If so, it
looks as though Rand is committed to the conclusion that the best human life is simply the temporally most extensive human life—no matter what the other features of that most extensive life are and no matter how that most extensive life comes about. Is everything that is good other than survival per se, e.g., rationality, productivity, and independence, good solely because and insofar as it results in (or tends to result in) the one thing that is non-instrumentally good, viz., survival? Is everything that is bad other than death per se, e.g., irrationality, parasitism, and dependence, bad solely because and insofar as it results in (or tends to result in) the only thing that is non-instrumentally bad, viz., death?

These questions are so obvious that even a primer on Randian ethics ought to identify them explicitly. Even a primer on a given doctrine—be it Randian ethics, or Thomistic ethics, or utilitarian ethics—ought to indicate to its readers the points at which it is natural for various questions to arise about the character of the doctrine under discussion. An honest primer says: “At this junction, these are the natural questions or possible problems with the view being espoused. Here is the way the view handles these questions or possible problems. You, the reader, can now judge for yourself whether these questions or possible problems are adequately handled.” This type of intellectual openness is absent from Biddle’s [Loving Life]. Biddle does offer an exposition that attempts to move from one set of claims to others; but the obstacles which have to be traversed are never identified; so the reader is never invited to judge for herself how well those obstacles have been traversed.

Furthermore, Biddle himself attempts to sidestep the whole set of survival questions by sliding from talk about “life” as a human being’s ultimate value to talk about “human life and happiness” (50) or “survival and happiness” (53) as that being’s ultimate value. Biddle tends, quite appropriately, to stick to “life” while in the process of putting forward Rand’s core claim about the essential connection between valuing and life. But, once this argument has done its job of establishing the existence of some ultimate value, Biddle allows himself to include “happiness” within that ultimate value. Indeed, when Biddle comes to discuss the various Randian virtues, his emphasis is very much on the purported connection between these virtues and happiness, not on the purported connection between these virtues and survival. Of course, Biddle probably feels justified in moving without any explicit acknowledgment from life to happiness, because Rand herself affirms an essential relation between life and happiness. According to Rand (1964, 29):

The maintenance of life and the pursuit of happiness are not two separate issues. To hold one’s own life as one’s ultimate value, and one’s own happiness as one’s highest purpose are two aspects of the same achievement.

Unfortunately, looked at in the cold light of day, this claim does not seem credible. It is not credible if the life which is a human being’s ultimate value is that being’s survival and if happiness is a type of psychic state—a congeries of welcome experiential states. For surely it is one issue whether a human has engaged in life-promoting activities and another issue whether that human is in the psychic state called “happiness.” There may be some positive correlation—perhaps even a quite robust positive correlation—between engaging in life-promoting activities and being in that psychic state. But these surely remain two separate issues. Or, more precisely, these remain two separate issues unless one redefines “life” and/or “happiness” so as to close the conceptual gap between them.

Some of the important claims made by Rand and many of her followers (including Biddle) amount to attempts to close what at least seems to be a significant conceptional gap between “life” and “happiness.” Indeed, Rand and many of her followers attack the gap from both ends—by, in effect, proposing redefinings of both “life” and “happiness.” “Life” is moved toward a necessary connection with “happiness” by attempting to incorporate more into the ultimate value of life than the original key argument about the essential relation between value and survival seems to warrant. The conception of life as surviving in certain ways by certain means (e.g., by being rational, productive, independent and so on) is substituted for the conception of life as survival. And “happiness” is moved toward
a necessary connection with "life" by reconceptualizing happiness as the experiential state that arises from one's surviving in certain ways by certain means (e.g., by being rational, productive, independent and so on).21

Conceptual revision for the sake of closing apparent conceptual gaps is a perfectly legitimate philosophical process. It may even be the central characteristic of positive philosophical argumentation. More precisely, one's engaging in conceptual revision is legitimate if one is self-conscious of what one is doing, if one knows why one is doing it, if one provides justification for one's conceptual revisions, and if one recognizes what one has and what one has not achieved through one's conceptual revisions. My complaint here against Biddle is not that he engages in argument by way of reconceptualization. Rather, my complaint is that, insofar as he is so engaged, he is not self-conscious of what he is doing, does not know why he is doing it, does not provide justification for the reconceptualizations that he offers, and does not recognize what would be achieved and what would not be achieved through a justified reconceptualization process. We shall revisit this failure to justify one's conceptual revisions and to recognize what is and what is not achieved through them in the next three sections, which deal with the Shuffle and Biddle's commission of it.

VII. The Shuffle

In this section, I will explain what I mean by the Shuffle; in the next two sections, we will see the Shuffle at work in Loving Life. Rand and most of her followers make many claims of the form: Each individual's ultimate good requires that the individual behave or avoid behaving in so-and-so way. For instance, both as to form and substance, a very characteristic Randian claim is that an individual's ultimate good requires that this individual avoid parasitic behavior. It is important to notice that this claim, like many claims of the same form in Rand's ethics, can be understood and defended in two different ways. The claim can be understood as an unpacking of an implication of one's conception of the ultimate human good. In this case, the thought would be that, if one correctly conceives of this good—whether one labels it "survival" or "life" or "happiness"—one sees that, by its nature, this good excludes parasitism. Once one has the correct conception of the ultimate human good—again, whether one labels it "survival" or "life" or "happiness"—one does not need to engage in (further) empirical investigation about how reality works in order to assess the claim that being a parasite can never be conducive to an individual's good. Rather, once one has that correct conception on hand, one examines it to see whether parasitism is consistent or inconsistent with an individual's attainment of his good so conceived. Let us call this the "conceptual" understanding and defense of claims of the specified form.

Alternatively, the claim that an individual's ultimate good requires that this individual avoid parasitic behavior can be understood as a fairly direct claim about how things work in the world. Here the thought is that we do not know simply on the basis of having a correct conception of an individual's ultimate good that parasitism will never be conducive to that individual's ultimate good. So, instead of having recourse to that conception, we have to proceed directly to an investigation of how the world works to see whether or not an individual's parasitism will ever be an effective strategy for promoting her good. In this second case, the conclusion that parasitism can never be conducive to an individual's good will be the result of a very complex economic, sociological, and psychological investigation of the world—including especially the world of interactions among persons. Let us call this the "causal" understanding and defense of claims of the specified kind.

On the conceptual understanding, if parasitism is rejected, it is rejected because non-parasitism is constitutive of what is ultimately valuable for the individual. The conceptual defense of this claim consists of showing that a proper specification of ultimate human value reveals that non-parasitism is partially constitutive of that good. In contrast, on the causal understanding, if parasitism is rejected, it is rejected because it causes some loss of what is ultimately valuable to the parasitic individual. In this case, parasitism is not rejected as itself ultimately disvaluable; rather it is rejected on the grounds that it is
instrumentally disvaluable. Part of a problem that pervades Randian arguments in ethics is the persistent failure to recognize that claims of the specified form can be understood and defended in these two distinct ways. The even larger part of that problem is that Randian argumentation persistently shuffles back and forward between the conceptual and the causal understandings and defenses. It is especially common to shuffle from the causal understanding and defense of a claim of the specified form to the conceptual understanding and defense when the inadequacy of the causal defense is becoming too obvious.

I need to add one final bit of complexity—actually, one nest of complexities—before turning to nice examples of the Shuffle that Biddle unwittingly provides. I have contrasted the conceptual and causal understandings and defense of a given claim, e.g., the claim that the attainment of what has ultimate human value requires the avoidance of parasitism. This way of speaking suggests that causal and conceptual defenses are defenses of the very same claim. This suggestion is misleading and I need to correct for that. Characteristically, as one moves from an initial causal defense to a conceptual defense, there is a shift in the precise claim that is being defended. Let me explain in terms of our ongoing example. This explanation should also further clarify the distinction between causal and conceptual defenses of claims and what is involved in shifting from a causal to a conceptual defense.

Suppose one begins one’s attempt to defend the claim that what has ultimate human value requires non-parasitism with a philosophically unrefined conception of what is ultimately valuable. For instance, one might begin by conceiving of what is ultimately valuable as survival in the unrefined sense of continuing to be a live human being. One is not going to rely upon any nice philosophical elucidation of the conception of human survival to support the contention that unrefined survival requires non-parasitism. Rather one is going to rely upon seeing how the world works. One is going to broadly survey cases in which unrefined survival is promoted. And one’s survey will support one’s contention if one discovers that, every time unrefined survival is promoted this is the result of the individual’s productivity rather than her parasitism. But suppose that this investigation into the workings of the world seems not quite to reveal that unrefined survival is always produced by the individual’s productivity and never produced by her parasitism. Suppose there appear to be cases in which an individual’s survival seems precisely to be the result of her parasitism.

One response to this would be to look ever more closely at how the world works. Perhaps, in these troublesome cases, it is not really parasitism that is promoting the individual’s survival. Or perhaps there really is parasitism at work but, contrary to appearances, that parasitism is not resulting in enhanced survival. Many years ago a now still loyal member of the Peikoff faction told me that the reported statistics on life expectancy in Sweden, which suggested a positive correlation between certain parasitic social policies and enhanced survival, were invalid. For whatever it was worth, this advocate of the causal defense of the claim that survival requires non-parasitism was sticking to his causal guns. Unfortunately, sticking to one’s guns will not often be a good strategy for defending claims of the specified form against apparent real world counterexamples. If one is employing an unrefined conception of survival, there will almost certainly be more counterexamples to the claim that survival requires avoidance of parasitism than one can honestly dismiss.

A different sort of response to such apparently disconfirming facts can be pursued. This response involves a refinement of one’s conception of survival and one’s shift to a cognate conceptual defense. Just for the sake of illustrating this different sort of response, suppose that one argues that part of having a valuable human life is participating in mutually open, mutually respectful relationships with other individuals. One argues that a life which lacks such relationships lacks one of the dimensions constitutive of a valuable human life. Let us suppose that one also maintains that any parasitic behavior by an agent significantly diminishes that agent’s capacity for participating in mutually open, mutually respectful relationships with other individuals. And suppose that one thereby arrives at the conclusion that valuable human life requires non-parasitism. This would be to offer a respectable and substantially
conceptual defense for this conclusion. (The argument would only be substantially conceptual because its second premise would still be a causal claim.)

It is crucial, however, to notice that the conceptual claim and the causal claim do not have the same subject matter. The subject matter of the conceptual claim is refined survival; the claim says that refined survival—life as it has been reconceived—requires non-parasitism. The subject matter of the causal claim is unrefined survival; the claim says that unrefined survival—just plain staying alive—requires non-parasitism. It is vital that anyone who defends what first comes to the table as a causal claim by shifting over to a conceptual defense recognize that the conclusion yielded by such a shift and defense is not the same claim as was first brought to the table. After all, not even the best philosophical argument is going to nullify the fact that there are counterexamples to the original causal claim!

What then is the Shuffle? The Shuffle is some combination of: (a) shifting from a causal to a conceptual defense without recognizing what one is doing; (b) merely stipulating or not arguing adequately for the conceptual revision that one is employing within one’s conceptual defense; (c) not recognizing that the conclusion which is supported by one’s conceptual defense is not the same as the conclusion that would be vindicated by looking at the world were it not for those pesky counterexamples; and (d) shifting (back) from the conclusion of the conceptual defense to the conclusion of the causal defense. The Shuffle is most egregious when an author simply scampers back and forth between causal and conceptual understandings of a given proclamation—scampering to the conceptual understanding when the real world counterexamples cannot be denied and scampering to the causal understanding when the author seeks to evade the emptiness of a conceptual defense that is purely stipulative.

One final point to avoid irrelevant complexities. It might be thought that my distinction between the conceptual and the causal understanding and defense of claims of the specified form amounts to an invocation of the discredited distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions. That thought would be mistaken—as should be clear from my repeated contrast between justified and purely stipulative conceptual revisions. Causal and conceptual claims differ in the degree to which they are directly subject to confirmation or disconfirmation by looking at the world. The picture I have is of a sort of web of belief. Causal claims are near the periphery of such a web of belief while conceptual claims are near or at the center. Claims near or at the center tie together and provide a connecting framework for the claims that are nearer to or at the edge. But the whole web is about the way the world is.

VIII. Biddle’s Shuffle with Respect to Life and Non-Parasitism

As I have said, Biddle provides nice examples of the Shuffle. Biddle (2002) claims that an individual’s life requires (his) productivity. “Human life depends on productive work” (56). “[A] person either produces the values required to sustain and further his life, or he dies” (76). “[I]f we want to live and achieve happiness, we have to produce the material values on which our life and happiness depend” (76). I think it is clear that Biddle understands himself to be saying that, for each person, that person’s life requires productivity; that person’s life requires avoidance of parasitism. We seem here to have a causal claim about how the world works. For each person, that person’s productivity results in life for that person and that person’s parasitism results in death for that person. To defend this claim, we have to go out to see how the world works. In particular, we have to see whether it is always true in the world that parasitism does not extend the life of the parasite. Well, what do we find when we look out into the world? We seem to find counterexamples to this causal claim. We seem to find some instances in which a human individual’s parasitism does extend the life of that human individual. This finding should be of no great surprise when we recollect the fact that there are, after all, whole species whose survival strategy is parasitism. Biddle himself acknowledges that “if other people are willing to serve as his host, he can exist as a parasite” (76).

What does Biddle do in the face of these apparent counterexamples? Does he engage in a closer examination of the way the
shortens monkey life; it kills them. But suppose that in some well-run zoos monkeys seem to live longer than they do in the wild—because, as part of a comprehensive management of their existence, the monkeys are protected from predators and receive medical treatment. And suppose that a closer look at the zoo does not reveal that the managers are lying when they report on the monkey’s longevity. Then the advocate of the original proposition might shift to saying that monkey existence in zoos—even long and healthy monkey existence in zoos—is not really monkey life because monkey life consists in scampering around in the wild without being subject to human management. This, in itself, would not be a crazy claim. It may even be what the person with the placard saying “Zoos kill monkeys” really means to say. We can all understand the thought that monkeys in zoos—even well-run zoos—do not get to live in accordance with the monkey mode of life. But we all can also understand that with this thought the case against monkey confinement has shifted. It is now being claimed that monkey confinement in zoos is contrary to a refined conception of “genuine” monkey life and not that monkey confinement shortens the lifespan of monkeys. Moreover, we can all understand that it is illicit to slip from an affirmation of the claim now being made back to an affirmation of the original claim that confinement shortens the lifespan of monkeys. We can all understand that the illicit character of this slip cannot be papered over by saying that those long surviving monkeys in the zoo are not really monkeys or are really dead monkeys (of the living-dead variety).

IX. Two More Shuffles by Biddle

Biddle provides another example of the Shuffle when he seeks to defend the claim that each individual’s life—apparently, life in the philosophically unrefined sense of longevity—requires that this individual suffer no infringement on his property. The apparent counterexamples, which we seem to find when we look out into the world, are those cases in which a partial taking of an individual’s property seems not to damage the right holder’s life (in the unrefined
sense). Biddle’s response is not to maintain that, if we look more carefully at the way the world works, we will find in each of these cases that, in the unrefined sense, the life of the right holder is really in fact damaged. Rather, Biddle’s response is to shift to a different conception of life according to which not being subject to any deprivation of one’s property is constitutive of having a life—or, in any case, a human life. As Biddle puts it, any deprivation of property converts one into a serf. And although “as a serf your heart might continue beating for a while...a ‘life’ of serfdom is not a human life” (116).

The shift to a conception of human life such that if an individual undergoes any deprivation of his property he no longer has a human life is pure stipulation on Biddle’s part. No reason is offered for understanding human life in this way. Do not many people who suffer some deprivations of property still live human lives? Did not even some real serfs live human lives? What is accomplished by this stipulatative shift is escape from having to confront apparently pesky counterexamples to the claim that all deprivations of property diminish survival. Given the stipulative reconception of “human life,” one can offer the following circle-right defense of the claim that human life requires no deprivations of property: If one suffers any deprivation of property, one does not have a human life; hence, human life requires that there be no deprivations.

So, the first problem here is the purely stipulated, ungrounded shift to a highly refined conception of human life. The second problem is that the claim that is thereby defended is not the original claim. For that original claim was the causal claim that every deprivation of property results in some loss of life to the right holder—where life is understood in the unrefined sense of longevity. The claim that is defended by way of the ungrounded conceptual shift is that any deprivation of property damages the right holder in the sense that it takes away from the right holder the condition of not being subject to any deprivation of property (and this condition is stipulated to be essential to having a “human life”). That this pretty damn empty conceptual claim is very different in scope from the original causal claim should be clear from the following point. It would be perfectly consistent to accept this conceptual claim (“Well, since the agent undergoes a deprivation of his property, he cannot have a human life”) and also to accept that lots of deprivations of property do not damage the right holder in his unrefined life. This shows that the claim arrived at via conceptual stipulation does not deal with the apparent counterexamples. It evades them. (Notice, by the way, Biddle’s grudging acknowledgment. The serf’s heart “might” continue beating for “a while.” Why is Biddle grudging in his acknowledgment? The answer is that what he really wants as his conclusion is the causal claim that any “serf,” i.e., anyone who suffers any deprivation of property, will die.)

Biddle also commits the Shuffle when he argues for the claim that happiness requires honesty. He starts out with a causal understanding and defense. We are to look at the world and, we hope, discover that dishonesty always undermines happiness. But what about apparent counterexamples, e.g., the car thief who seems to be happy? Well we deal with this by shuffling over to the conceptual claim that “[g]enuine joy comes from achieving values, not stealing them” (81). By consulting a more adequate conception of happiness, we see that the thief cannot be the subject of genuine happiness—no matter how much happiness as a type of experiential state the thief has. Recall that I am not complaining in general about conceptual understandings and defenses of claims like the one at hand. It may even be that a correct conception of happiness does make actual achievement by the agent an essential condition of the agent’s genuine happiness. My point is that, if this is what one is saying, one should understand that this is what one is saying. One should be clear that one is saying: “This is how I think we best understand—best conceptualize—happiness or joy and, on this understanding, happiness or joy requires so-and-so achievement on the part of the agent. So-and-so achievement is constitutive of happiness or joy in this favored sense.” If one does not notice that this is what one is saying, one will think that in shifting over to and providing this sort of conceptual defense of the claim that the thief cannot be happy, one has provided a defense of the original causal claim that dishonest behavior can never result in pleasant states of mind for the dishonest
person.

Biddle has mastered the art of switching to purely stipulative conceptual defenses of his favorite claims and then studiously failing to notice that he has done this. This is neatly exemplified in the following short paragraph:

Ill-gotten gains are not and cannot be values; they are and can only be disvalues. They are not rewards, but penalties. They do not promote one’s life; they thwart it—they do so every time. Thus, not only is it true that honesty pays; the deeper truth is that only honesty pays. Such is the nature of reality. (83)

The first two sentences and the first clause of the third pretty much just announce Biddle’s insistence that, as he conceives of a valuable human life, “ill-gotten” gains contravene rather than contribute to a valuable human life. Life is so understood that it follows from someone having a life that this person does not have any “ill-gotten gains.” One might make a case for this way of conceiving of a valuable human life—although Biddle does not begin to do so. But with “they do so every time,” Biddle shuffles back to the causal claim. When we look out into the world, we see that every time dishonesty results in unrefined losses to the dishonest person. The “nature of reality” always causes the dishonest individual to be a loser in ordinary, unrefined ways. How can Biddle think that he has established this unexceptional correlation? My most generous hypothesis is that he conflates the conceptual claim that life conceived in a special, refined way requires the absence of dishonesty and the causal claim that dishonest acts always result in ordinary, unrefined losses for the dishonest individual and, thereby, he conflates a (purely stipulative) defense of the former claim with a causal defense of the latter claim. (One less generous reading is that this passage is simply one of Biddle’s mantras. The more it’s chanted, the more it feels like it’s true and deep.)

X. Anticipating Rand’s Shuffling

As one might expect, the prime examples of shuffling within Rand’s own text occur in those passages in “The Objectivist Ethics” in which she attempts to deal with what I have called the survival questions. In this and the next two sections, I will take on the difficult task of providing an illuminating explication of what is going on in the portion of “The Objectivist Ethics” in which Rand (1964) attempts to move from the assertion of survival as “man’s” ultimate value to the conclusion that “man’s survival” requires reason (conceptual awareness) and productivity (non-parasitism) (18–25). Our discussion of the nature of the Shuffle and our identification of instances of it in Biddle’s Loving Life makes it easier to recognize phases of the Shuffle when they appear within Rand’s own argumentation. Nevertheless, I think it is helpful to precede a direct look at passages from Rand with some explanation of precisely what problems one may anticipate finding.

We have already noted that Rand casts her core argument for the ultimate value of survival in terms of a stark contrast between life (as survival) and death. The resulting standard for assessing an organism’s actions is “the organism’s survival” (16). A code of ethics must be discovered because “[m]an has no automatic code of survival” (19). To seek such a code for man is to ask: “What are the values his survival requires?” (22). Now Rand quite reasonably points out that an organism’s survival means its survival as an entity of its (original) kind. If I am worried about my survival because I have been diagnosed with a normally fatal disease, I am not going to be much relieved to hear about a series of injections that will convert me into a healthy, long-lived tortoise. In this sense, if a human organism’s survival is its ultimate value, that value is attained only if that organism survives as a member of the human kind. Rand is also correct to point out that, for an organism to survive over a considerable period of time, it must conduct itself or be treated in certain specific ways. For an organism to survive over time as a member of its kind, it must conduct itself or be treated in somewhat more specific ways. It is highly plausible that, for each kind of living entity,
there are some ways of its conducting itself that are especially likely (at least under common circumstances) to contribute to its survival as a member of its kind and some ways of its conducting itself that are especially likely (at least under common circumstances) to hinder its survival as a member of its kind. So, in seeking out a code of human conduct for the sake of survival, it makes perfectly good sense to try to discover what modes of conduct are likely to contribute to an individual's survival as a human being and what modes of conduct are likely to hinder an individual's survival as a human being.

An investigation of the ways in which the nature of reality dictates which sorts of conduct will generally be conducive to a human being's survival and which sorts of conduct will generally be inimical to a human being's survival will, almost certainly, yield a batch of rules of thumb for one's behavior. Eat nutritious food. Don't eat poison. Seek shelter in bad weather. Don't jump off cliffs without a parachute. And so on. Perhaps more general rules of thumb can also be identified. Use one's capacity for conceptual understanding. Don't expect other people to take care of your needs. So far, then, what is in prospect is a moral doctrine that consists simply in these two things: (1) The identification of each human individual’s survival as a living human being as that individual’s ultimate good; and (2) A set of rules of thumb about what types of behavior individuals ought for the most part to engage in or avoid so as to maximize their respective survival.

It is obvious that Rand would have two main problems with such a doctrine. First, although she has a real interest in sticking with unrefined, hard-nosed, bare survival as that which is of ultimate value, she also wants to parry the charge that she takes mere survival as man's ultimate good. To parry this charge, she offers a refinement or reconceptualization of survival that moves us away from (1). Under this refinement, man's survival is to be understood as “man's survival qua man” (23). Second, Rand wants much stronger claims than are anticipated in (2) about how individuals are or are not to behave if they are to attain what is ultimately valuable. In particular, she wants to establish norms of the now familiar form: Each individual's ultimate good requires that the individual behave or avoid behaving in so-and-so way. For example, she wants to arrive at the claim that each individual's survival requires that individual to eschew parasitism. Moreover, a shift from the unrefined conception of survival (as staying alive as a human entity) to a refined conception of survival (survival qua man) seems to be the most promising way to get to those stronger claims about what survival requires. For suppose one can say that a correctly refined conception of human survival discloses that staying alive by certain means (e.g., being productive) is constitutive of human survival and staying alive by other means (e.g., being parasitic) is counter-constitutive of human survival. Then one could go on to say that, if one thinks about the now recognized nature of man's survival, one will see—as an implication of the nature of man's survival—that productivity and non-parasitism are required for man's survival to obtain.

Things are complicated by the fact that, although Rand has an interest in shifting from an unrefined to a refined conception of human survival, she also has an interest in sticking to the unrefined conception of human survival as staying alive. For one thing, the formulation of her fundamental argument for the essential connection between value and life in terms of a stark contrast between life and death points to unrefined survival as the ultimate value. In addition, Rand does not want merely to conclude that people who violate her favored norms will miss out on survival in some refined sense. She does not want merely to say that these people will forgo the special sort of refined survival achieved by productive and non-parasitic men. Rather, Rand wants to conclude that people who do not abide by the moral requirements she identifies will die. She wants to say that these people will (good and hard) get the fundamental alternative to survival, which is death.

Moreover, while Rand sometimes wants to make use of the idea that being productive, avoiding parasitism, and so on are constitutive of the ultimate human good, she also wants to cast the relationship between survival and the ways in which reality requires humans to act if they are to survive as that of ultimate and the means that causally result in that end. Rand tends to accept implicitly a view of ultimate ends and recommended actions very much like that of
simple utilitarians. There is a simple, uncomplicated ultimate good—unrefined survival for Rand, unrefined pleasure for simple utilitarians—and everything else that is commended is commended because it is causally productive of the simple ultimate end. Everything else that has value has instrumental value. This facet of Rand’s stance pushes her toward the causal understanding of claims about what (unrefined) survival requires.

We should, then, be prepared to see Rand beginning with one or more causal claims of the specified form. We should then expect to see Rand shifting from the unrefined to a refined conception of human survival—a refined conception which will support a conceptual defense of claims about what human survival requires. We should be prepared to evaluate whatever justification is offered by Rand for the observed shift from the unrefined to the refined conception of survival. In addition, we should be prepared to see Rand shifting back from a conceptual defense of statements about what survival requires to causal understandings of those statements. And we should be prepared to see that the causal claim to which Rand circles back is not the claim for which a conceptual defense has been offered. Thus, even if the shift to a refined conception of survival is itself vindicated and that refined conception supports the claim that, by its nature, refined survival requires non-parasitism, we should be alert to the error of thinking that the original causal contention that unrefined survival requires non-parasitism has been vindicated. In the next section, I will look at Rand’s attempts to justify a shift from the unrefined conception of human survival to a (suitably) refined conception and, hence, to put herself in position to offer a conceptual defense of claims about what human survival requires. In the next yet section, we shall look at Rand’s shifting back and forth between causal and conceptual claims about what survival requires.

XI. Rand’s Shift from the Unrefined to the Refined Conception of Survival

The conclusion of Rand’s key metaethical argument is that “[t]he goal of action, the ultimate value which, to be kept, must be gained through its every moment, is the organism’s life” (16–17). Rand then moves on to a discussion of the means by which survival is to be obtained. We are to expect that some modes of conduct will (at least characteristically) contribute to survival while other modes of conduct will (at least characteristically) not contribute to survival. For he (“man”) is a specific organism of a specific nature that requires specific actions to sustain his life. He cannot achieve his survival by arbitrary means nor by random motions nor by blind urges nor by chance nor by whim. That which his survival requires is set by his nature and is not open to his choice. (22)

One of the main conclusions Rand intends to reach is that, “[f]or man, the basic means of survival is reason” (21; emphasis mine on “means”). This conclusion is presented as the special instantiation in the case of “man” of the more general proposition that, “[c]onsciousness—for those living organisms which possess it—is the basic means of survival” (18; emphasis mine). To survive, “man” has to adjust to or transform his environment so as to sustain or create the specific conditions necessary for “man’s survival.” And, in the case of “man,” this survival cannot be attained by instinctual or merely perceptual processes. “Man’s survival” can only be attained through the exercise of conceptual awareness. Throughout these and similar passages, it seems quite clear that Rand is implicitly distinguishing between the end to be attained, viz., human survival, and the basic means to the attainment of that end, viz., conceptual awareness. When Rand asks, “[w]hat are the values his survival requires?” (22), it is again quite clear that she is implicitly distinguishing between the ultimate value which is survival and values (goals, types of actions, types of character traits) that are conducive to survival and that are valuable in virtue of being conducive to survival. We start out knowing what the ultimate end is; then we have to consult reality to discover what modes of conduct are required for the attainment of this ultimate end. Rand’s exposition of the role that conceptual awareness plays vis-a-vis
“man’s survival” seems intended to yield the causal conclusion that “man’s” survival is causally served by conceptual awareness (and causally hindered by departures from conceptual awareness).

Throughout the last paragraph I have placed quotation marks around “man” and “man’s survival” to remind the reader of a very striking feature of Rand’s discussion of what human survival requires of people. One would expect Rand, the supreme individualist, to say that the survival of each individual human being requires that individual’s conceptual awareness and that the survival of each individual human being requires that individual’s productivity (and non-parasitism). It is far from clear exactly why Rand, instead, speaks continuously of “man” and “man’s survival.” The most generous interpretation of what is going on with all this talk about “man” and “man’s survival” is that Rand is seeking to put aside distracting contingencies and to focus resolutely on essentials. Rand’s proceeding in terms of “man” and “man’s survival” saves us from being distracted by certain particular facts, viz., instances in which individuals seem to survive without conceptual awareness or through parasitism. Rand’s proceeding in this way focuses our attention firmly on a deeply grounded general pattern, viz., individuals by and large survive through their own conceptual awareness and productivity. Unfortunately, it may be that we should be attentive to (i.e., distracted by) these particular facts. It may be that the deeply grounded general pattern is not the only thing essential to determining whether it is universally true that human survival requires conceptual awareness and productivity on the part of the surviving individual.

If we are really interested in whether conceptual awareness and productivity are always required for human survival and whether thoughtlessness and parasitism do always inhibit human survival, we cannot begin with the presumption that particular cases in which an individual’s conceptual awareness or her productivity do not seem to be required for her survival or particular cases in which an individual’s thoughtlessness or parasitism do seem to result in her survival are distracting contingencies. We cannot presume that the only essential facts are those that are part of the general pattern. However precisely we disentangle Rand’s continual invocation of the generic “man” and his generic “survival,” it is fair to say that its effect is to draw attention away from counterexamples to the claim that, for each human individual, conceptual awareness and productivity are required for her survival.

Indeed, it is worth mentioning one other way in which Rand’s proceeding in terms of “man” and “man’s survival” rather than in terms of each individual and her particular survival is illicitly distracting. Rand often insists that those who survive without themselves employing reason or being productive do so in virtue of other people employing reason and being productive. In fact, one of the favorite themes of Rand as a social-cultural commentator is that lots of people are surviving on the basis of other people’s rationality and productivity. Nevertheless, within her basic ethical theorizing nothing could be more discomfiting than acknowledging that lots of individuals survive without themselves employing conceptual awareness and being productive. Within that ethical theorizing, then, nothing could be more helpful than a device that distracts Rand and her readers from the distinction between an individual’s surviving in virtue of her own reason and productivity and an individual’s surviving in virtue of someone else’s reason and productivity. And, without being consciously intended for this purpose, Rand’s continual talk about “man’s survival” requiring “man’s” conceptual awareness and productivity serves precisely as such a device. For this manner of speaking distracts Rand and her readers from the question: Whose rationality and productivity in particular are we talking about when we consider the claim that rationality and productivity are required for human survival?

Overall, I believe, the effect of Rand’s casting her discussion in terms of “man” and “man’s survival” is that it postpones the need to address the question: Does each individual’s survival really require that individual’s conceptual awareness and productivity? It postpones that question until Rand has shifted from the unrefined to the refined conception of survival and, hence, until Rand takes herself to be in position to offer a conceptual rather than causal defense of the statement that each individual’s survival requires her own conceptual
awareness and productivity.\textsuperscript{38}

After several pages devoted to the need for conceptual awareness
as a means to survival, Rand indicates that she is ready to answer
the question: “What are the values his [man’s] survival requires?” (22).
She reiterates the claim that ethics, i.e., the specification of the values
that man’s survival requires, is not “the province of the irrational”—
because some values (i.e., subsidiary goals, modes of actions,
character traits) really are conducive to survival while others really are
not conducive to survival. Then she provides two short paragraphs
which each reiterate that survival or life is the ultimate “standard.” In
the second of these paragraphs—which consists mostly of a passage
from Galt’s speech (in \textit{Atlas Shrugged})—we find Galt saying that the
alternative to being a “rational being” is being a “suicidal animal” (23;
emphatic mine).\textsuperscript{39} Then we get three very short paragraphs, which,
as I am parsing Rand’s argument, are the core of her shift from the
unrefined conception of survival (i.e., staying alive as a member of
the human species) to the refined conception of survival (i.e., staying
alive-by-way-of-conceptual-awareness-and-productivity).\textsuperscript{40} It will be
useful to present these three paragraphs in full.

The standard of value of the Objectivist ethics—the standard
by which one judges what is good or evil—is man’s life,
or: that which is required for man’s survival \textit{qua} man.

Since reason is man’s basic means of survival, that which is
proper to the life of a rational being is the good; that which
negates, opposes or destroys it is the evil.

Since everything man needs has to be discovered by his own
mind and produced by his own effort, the two essentials of
the method of survival proper to a rational being are:
thinking and productive work. (23)

It is clear that in the first sentence Rand wants to say that the
ultimate end of human survival (or “man’s life”) ought not to be
understood as merely staying alive but, rather, as “man’s survival \textit{qua}

man.” “Man’s survival \textit{qua} man” is a certain special type of staying
alive; it is staying alive by way of one’s employing the means
of staying alive that are “basic” for “man.” What is absolutely central
here is the incorporation of the basic \textit{means} of staying alive into the
end of survival. The basic means are incorporated into the end of
“survival” not simply in the sense that this end is now to be thought
as having two distinct ingredients, viz., staying alive and being
conceptually aware, productive, and so on. Rather the basic means
of staying alive are integrated into the end of “survival” in the sense
that the end becomes staying-alive-by-these-basic-means.\textsuperscript{41}

That Rand is here giving expression to this conversion of basic
means for the end of survival into integrated aspects of that end
explains an otherwise puzzling feature of this sentence. One would
expect Rand to say in this sentence that “man’s life” is not merely
staying alive as a member of the human species but rather is “man’s
survival \textit{qua} man.” But what she actually says is that “man’s life” is
“that which is required for man’s survival \textit{qua} man” (emphasis mine). On
the surface, Rand seems to be committing the elementary mistake of
conflating an end with that which is required for that end. We can
acquit Rand of making this elementary mistake only by taking her to
be expressing the incorporation of which I have just spoken. What
has first made its appearance as the basic \textit{means} to man’s survival—
as distinct from albeit causally required for survival—is, on reflection,
to be seen as integrated constitutive aspects of the \textit{end} of survival.

Conceptual awareness, productivity, non-parasitism and so on are
now to be taken to be part of survival properly conceived. And, if
these ways of conducting oneself are part of survival properly
conceived, then one can provide a conceptual defense of the claim
that survival requires conceptual awareness, productivity, and so on.
The defense is simply that the revised, refined conception of survival
reveals that, by its very nature, (refined) survival requires conceptual
awareness, productivity, and so on. Notice then that, with the
incorporation of the basic \textit{means} of survival into a refined conception
of the \textit{end} of survival, we have shifted from causal claims about what
is required for (unrefined) survival to conceptual claims about what
is required for (refined) survival. The question, of course, is whether
this conceptual revision of survival is justified.

The second of these three short paragraphs seems to me to be the core of Rand's attempt to justify this revision. The third sentence seems intended to reiterate and extend (perhaps illicitly) the argumentative move made in the second sentence. Here, again, is that second sentence:

Since reason is man's basic means of survival, that which is proper to the life of a rational being is the good; that which negates, opposes or destroys it is the evil. (23)

The "since" indicates that Rand is asserting that the claim she has been arguing for over the several previous pages, viz., that reason is man's basic means for staying alive, is the ground for some further conclusion. That further conclusion is that the (ultimate) good for man is "that which is proper to the life of a rational being." I take it that "that which is proper to the life of a rational being" is the same as "that which is required for man's survival qua man." So we can read the crucial first clause of Rand's sentence as saying that, since reason is man's basic means of survival, that which is required for man's survival qua man is the (ultimate) good. Since man's survival qua man is man's staying-alive-by-way-of-the-basic-means-of-man's-survival, what Rand is saying in the main clause of her sentence is:

Since reason is man's basic means of survival, man's staying-alive-by-way-of-reason is the (ultimate) good.

This is nice because we can now see that the second sentence is supposed to reveal the ground for the claim of the first sentence, viz., that man's ultimate value is staying-alive-by-way-of-reason (and productivity and so on). Unfortunately, the only thing that is offered as a premise for the conclusion that man's ultimate end is staying-alive-by-way-of-reason is the premise that reason is man's basic means of staying alive. That is to say, the only ground that is offered to justify the incorporation of acting by way of reason into man's ultimate end is the claim that reason is man's basic means of staying alive. This is exceedingly unhelpful because the crucial question is precisely why the recognition of reason as the basic means of staying alive grounds the conclusion that, not just staying alive, but rather staying-alive-by-way-of-reason is the ultimate end. As things stand, we simply have Rand's declaration that, since reason is a basic means, life in accordance with reason is the end. This is simply to declare that the fact that reason is a basic means to staying alive justifies shifting from the unrefined conception of the ultimate value of survival to the refined conception.

Perhaps, however, there is something in Rand's own wording that supports the incorporation of basic means for the end of survival into that end. Perhaps my substitution of "that which is required for man's survival qua man" for "that which is proper to the life of a rational being" has diverted our attention from Rand's justification for going from reason being a basic means of staying alive to our rational end being staying-alive-by-way-of-reason. So let us return briefly to Rand's own language.

Can anything be extracted from Rand's reference to man as "a rational being"? Perhaps Rand is saying that, since reason is man's basic means of survival, man is a rational being, and as a rational being he ought to live rationally. However, man's being a rational being means either man's being an entity whose basic means of survival is reason or man's being an entity whose good is (at least partially) constituted of living by reason. If we go with the first meaning, Rand's claim becomes the trivial claim that, since reason is man's basic means of staying alive, man is an entity whose basic means of survival is reason. If we go with the second meaning, Rand's claim becomes the non-trivial claim that, since reason is man's basic means of survival, man is an entity whose good is (at least partially) constituted of living rationally. The problem is that this non-trivial claim is precisely the claim that needs justification.

In this pivotal sentence, Rand may instead be seen as needing and getting crucial mileage out of the locution "is proper to." Indeed, I suggest that the most attractive rewriting of Rand's sentence is:

Since reason is man's basic means of survival, reason is
proper to man’s survival. But since reason is proper to man’s survival, then it is only survival that results from or manifests man’s reason that is proper for man; only survival that results from reason is survival properly speaking.

Unfortunately, this inference depends upon the ambiguity of “proper to.” “Proper to” can mean “characteristic of” or it can mean “right for.” The premise that we are assuming Rand may appeal to for purposes of this inference is that reason is proper to man’s survival in the sense that reason is characteristic of man’s survival; because of permanent features of man and reality, reason is typically a key means by which man stays alive. The conclusion that she wants to get to is that reason is proper to man’s survival in the sense that the survival that results from or manifests reason is the survival that is right for man. The restatement of Rand’s paragraph acquires its apparent plausibility from one’s not distinguishing between the two senses of “proper to.” It is only this failure to distinguish between the two senses of “proper to” that makes it seem plausible to infer that, since reason is proper to man’s survival in the first sense, then it is proper to man’s survival in the second sense. I conclude that, in the sentence that precedes it and in this pivotal sentence of “The Objectivist Ethics,” Rand first shifts from the unrefined to the refined conception of survival and then seeks to justify, but fails to justify, that shift.

Rand’s third one-sentence paragraph seems intended to work in the same way as the second paragraph—except that reason (“thinking”) and productivity appear wherever reason alone appears in the second paragraph. This paragraph is subject to essentially the same criticism as Rand’s pivotal second paragraph, viz., no reason is offered for the inference from reason and productivity being the basic means for survival to the conclusion that the ultimate end is survival-by-way-of-reason-and-productivity.44 It is, however, of some interest that “productivity” does not appear until this third paragraph. In similar fashion, almost all of Rand’s preceding discussion of the basic means required for human survival (18–22) asserts the necessity for conceptual awareness, not the necessity for conceptual awareness and productivity. Rand certainly holds that productivity is also required for survival. But productivity is mentioned primarily to emphasize the necessity for conceptual awareness—without which productivity would not be possible. “He [‘man’] cannot provide for his simplest physical needs without a process of thought” (21).

This suggests that, within a carefully articulated Randian-like moral scheme, reason and productivity might come in at different points. More specifically, it might be that operating through conceptual awareness can justifiably be included within the very concept of human life, while productivity cannot justifiably be included within the very concept of human life. One might reach the conclusion that to survive as a human being one must survive as a being capable of and engaged in conceptual awareness—and that a drug that saves me from my fatal disease by placing me in a permanent coma would not sustain my human life. Yet, at the same time, one might reach the conclusion that, if I managed to survive my disease and retain my conscious awareness by means of stealing an even better drug, I will have sustained an unrighteous but human life. In short, one might reach the conclusion that conceptual awareness is essential to human life without reaching the conclusion that productivity is essential to human life.

Notice that the conclusion that conceptual awareness is essential to human life—so that a surviving human vegetable would not possess a human life—is independent of the thesis that conceptual awareness is a basic means of man’s staying alive. What I mean is that one can arrive at this conclusion simply because conceptual awareness is a distinctive feature of the type of living things we classify as human and not because one believes that this feature is a basic means for such creatures remaining alive. Thus, the fact that conceptual awareness is essential to human life does not in itself lend plausibility to the distinctively Randian claim that conceptual awareness is essential to human life because conceptual awareness is a basic means of man’s staying alive.

One more simple point needs to be made about the different standing of conceptual awareness (reason) and productivity (non-parasitism). The claim that each individual must employ reason in
order to stay alive (or in order to have an enhanced chance of staying alive) is much more plausible than the claim that each individual must be productive in order to stay alive (or in order to have an enhanced chance of staying alive). All of Rand’s comments about the need to understand one’s environment, the need for identifying long-term ends, the need to grasp complex means-ends relationships, and so on speak to the need for each individual to make use of her capacity for conceptual awareness. But the use of that conceptual awareness may reveal opportunities to stay alive as a rational parasite. Given that enough other people are going to be productive, an individual’s conceptual awareness may disclose to her strategies for survival that involve expropriating the fruits of others’s productivity. Such strategies may involve a very high degree of rationality in the sense of the individual’s understanding her environment, identifying long-term ends, grasping complex means-ends relationships, and so on. Rationality in this sense is needed for survival-enhancing productivity and it is needed for survival-enhancing parasitism.

There is a standard two-stage response to the possibility of rational parasitism. Not surprisingly, these two stages correspond to the causal and conceptual facets of Randian argumentation. The first stage asserts that, if we look out into the world, we see that parasitic strategies do not in fact work or, in any case, they are not rational because the likelihood that they will work is low. This seems to me to be just wishful thinking. Certainly parasitic strategies often fail—as do productive strategies. Parasitic endeavors mostly fail in virtue of not being sufficiently strategically rational. On the other hand, there are plenty of cases in which, to all appearances, parasites do succeed—at least in terms of staying alive or the acquisition of life-preserving resources, e.g., money, nice shelter, good food, and so on. Fill in here the politician, social crusader, or politically connected businessman that you most despise. Nor can it plausibly be maintained that, although these parasites succeed at staying alive, they are all merely lucky—so that parasitism was not a rational strategy for any of them. Thus, it cannot plausibly be maintained that, if one looks out into the world, one will see that staying alive requires non-parasitism.

The second stage of the two-stage response asserts that parasitism cannot contribute to the human life of the parasite because “man’s life” is partially constituted of staying-alive-by-way-of-being-productive. The problem is that at this point this assertion is entirely question-begging. The question on the table is whether being productive is a basic means of staying alive. An affirmative answer is desired because it is thought that combining this answer with the claim that, if productivity is a basic means to staying alive, then staying-alive-by-means-of-productivity is part of “man’s life,” will yield the conclusion that staying-alive-by-means-of-productivity is part of “man’s life.” One cannot then legitimately invoke this conclusion as support for a premise in an argument that aims to establish this conclusion.

Rand’s pivotal move is the inference from reason and productivity being essential means to the end of staying alive to the conclusion that staying-alive-by-way-of-reason-and-productivity is man’s ultimate end. This move fails. Nevertheless, for the sake of continuing our examination of Rand’s reasoning, let us assume that Rand has justified her proposed reconceptualization of human survival and, hence, is in position to provide conceptual defenses of the claims that, for each individual, survival requires thought, survival requires productivity, and survival requires avoidance of parasitism.

XII. Rand’s Shifts to and back from the Causal Defenses

As one might anticipate, the passages that follow Rand’s attempts to support the conceptual claim that survival requires reason, productivity, and non-parasitism are followed by passages in which Rand finally seems willing to confront apparent counterexamples to the claims that (unrefined) survival requires rationality, productivity, and non-parasitism. I want to show that Rand is moved to confront these apparent counterexamples because she wants to conclude that those who do not practice her virtues shorten their lifespans (or at least are markedly more likely to shorten their lifespan). I want to show that in these passages Rand tends to dismiss counterexamples
to these causal claims by inappropriate invocation of the conceptual claims that (refined) survival requires rationality, productivity, and non-parasitism. Finally, I want to show that Rand has to rely inappropriately on these conceptual claims because the evidence that she musters for the counterpart causal claims is very meager indeed. Although, now and again, Rand points to the world in support of her claims that individuals must be rational, productive, and non-parasitic in order to stay alive, these gestures are of little evidential force.

Consider first a preliminary passage that focuses especially on thought as a requirement of staying alive and only partially illustrates the anticipated pattern.

If some men do not choose to think, but survive by imitating and repeating, like trained animals, the routine of sounds and motions they learned from others, never making an effort to understand their own work, it remains true that their survival is made possible only by those who did choose to think and to discover the motions they are repeating. The survival of such mental parasites depends on blind chance; their unfocused minds are unable to know whom to imitate, whose motions it is safe to follow. They are the men who march into the abyss, trailing after any destroyer who promises them to assume the responsibility they evade: the responsibility of being conscious. (23)

Notice that in the first sentence Rand seems to acknowledge that some individuals might indeed survive without choosing to think. However, this would not be genuine human survival because those individuals would be surviving “like trained animals.” This would not be genuine human survival because it would be parasitic survival—survival that depends on others “who . . . choose to think.” So far, then, we have a tacit conceptual defense of the claim that survival requires thought. The condition attained by individuals who do not think is not the condition of refined survival; but that, of course, is entirely consistent with thoughtlessness in one’s work being a great strategy for staying alive.

The fact that Rand wants to establish that thoughtlessness leads not only to diminished survival-by-thought but also diminished survival plain and simple is indicated by Rand’s shifting over to the claim that thoughtlessness is a very risky strategy vis-à-vis unrefined survival. Rand shifts over to this claim when she says that those who do not think only survive by “blind chance.” While some non-thinkers do attain unrefined survival, other non-thinkers—perhaps, the bulk of these herd-like beings—do not attain it. For they are “the men who march into the abyss.” So Rand goes, with skipping a beat, from the conceptual claim that continued survival as a non-thinker is not survival-by-way-of-thought—it is mere animal survival—to the causal claim that non-thinkers tend to die.

What I want to point out here is how meager Rand’s causal argument is, i.e., how meager is her appeal to the way reality works. Rand starts by pointing to men who are thoughtless in that they imitate and repeat in their work. Being thoughtless in this way is certainly no formula for one’s enviable success. But it does not obviously raise one’s chances of dying. Imitating and repeating in one’s work may be a safer strategy than innovating and striking out on unexplored paths.47

Perhaps because she senses that engaging in imitative and repetitive work does not strongly tend to endanger one’s life and certainly does not dramatically endanger one’s life, Rand shifts over to men who are thoughtless in their political allegiances. Given this shift, Rand’s conclusion here can, at most, be that being thoughtful with respect to one’s political allegiances is required for one’s unrefined survival. But even this claim encounters lots of (at least) apparent counter-examples. Many people have died because they thoughtlessly followed certain political leaders. But it is also true that many people have survived precisely because they have thoughtlessly followed certain political leaders. Moreover, many people have died because they have thoughtfully followed or thoughtfully refused to follow certain political leaders. Finally, many people’s political thoughtlessness simply has not affected the extent of their unrefined survival one way or the other. Their thoughtlessness takes them no further toward and no further away from the abyss. If we step back from the rhetoric
and look at the world and do not get mislead by the conceptual claim that (refined) survival requires thought, we will see that, at the very most, there is some indeterminate tendency for political thoughtfulness to enhance the (unrefined) survival of the individual who is politically thoughtful. I believe that Rand is oblivious to all these facts of reality because, as they approach, she shifts back to the conceptual claim that refined survival requires thought and does not recognize that she has thereby abandoned the causal claim that unrefined survival requires thought.

Consider this next passage:

If some men attempt to survive by means of brute force or fraud, by looting, robbing, cheating or enslaving the men who produce, it still remains true that their survival is made possible only by their victims, only by the men who choose to think and to produce the goods which they, the looters, are seizing. Such looters are parasites incapable of survival, who exist by destroying those who are capable, those who are pursuing a course of action proper to man. (23)

Again we seem to have a grudging acknowledgment that some men do survive through forms of parasitism. They do not merely “attempt to survive” by parasitic means; they seem actually to survive by these means. Yet, Rand says that since their survival “is made possible only by their victims,” these parasites are “incapable of survival.” I think that what Rand must primarily mean here is that these parasitic survivors are not surviving qua man; they are not surviving via “a course of action proper to man.” Assuming that Rand has established that man’s ultimate value is survival qua man (and that staying-alive-by-way-of-productivity is part of survival qua man), she may indeed go on to say that these looters are not surviving qua man. These looters are missing out on man’s ultimate value. They are missing out even if they are pursuing a reliable strategy for staying alive. But, if this is what she is saying, she cannot slip back (or forward) to the causal claim that parasitic behavior always results in the parasite’s death. However, this is surely the direction in which she is moving when she says what seems to be literally false—that these parasites are “incapable of survival.”

Perhaps Rand means the following:

These parasites seem capable of survival. But their survival depends on other people who are destroyed by the parasites’s behavior. Their apparent means of survival undermines their survival. Therefore, the parasites are not really capable of survival.

Unfortunately for this argument, parasites—especially rational parasites—need not destroy those upon whom they are parasitic. Nor is there any reason to believe that a parasite who, perhaps imprudently, destroys her hosts will be incapable of converting to non-parasitic behavior in order to stay alive. (The rational parasite’s maxim would be: Be parasitic when there are useful hosts around; otherwise be productive.) So there is no justification for Rand’s claim that parasitic humans are “incapable of survival” and, hence, they will not stay alive.

That Rand really does want to get back to the conclusion that bare unrefined survival requires reason and productivity is made clear by the next passage from “The Objectivist Ethics”:

The men who attempt to survive, not by means of reason, but by means of force, are attempting to survive by the method of animals. But just as animals would not be able to survive by attempting the method of plants, by rejecting locomotion and waiting for the soil to feed them—so men cannot survive by attempting the method of animals, rejecting reason and counting on productive men to serve as their prey. Such looters may achieve their goals for the range of the moment, at the price of destruction: the destruction of their victims and their own. As evidence, I offer you any criminal or any dictatorship. (23–24)

Notice again that the apparent surviving individuals are merely
attempting to survive. For a short period of time, they may seem to be staying alive; but over the long run they will suffer destruction. What does Rand say in support of this claim that, for each individual, unrefined survival requires reason and productivity? The main consideration seems to be that those who reject the methods of reason and productivity are rejecting man's basic means of survival. That is why those who reject the methods of reason and productivity achieve their own destruction. But this is a bit too fast. For the question we are concerned with is precisely whether, for each individual, reason and productivity are required for survival. The interesting challenge to Rand's view about the necessity of reason and productivity is not the claim that sometimes humans can survive without engaging in either conceptual awareness or productivity. Rather, the interesting challenge is the claim that sometimes humans can survive through conceptually aware parasitism, i.e., as rational parasites. The rational parasite goes beyond the methods of plants or animals to employ the distinctive human powers of foresight, planning, and the grasp of means-ends relationships in her attempt to survive. It is no response to the challenge of rational parasitism to point out that mindless parasitism is not at all likely to work for human beings.⁴⁸

What of the "evidence" that Rand offers for her causal claim that parasitism always yields the destruction of the life of the parasite (or at least that the likelihood of destruction is always great enough to make all parasitic strategies irrational)? Is it true that criminal behavior—in particular, conceptually aware criminal behavior—always leads to the destruction of the criminal or always hastens the death of the criminal or even always so increases the likelihood of the criminal's destruction that it is (for that reason) irrational for the criminal to pursue it? These are very big questions about what goes on in reality. The only way to begin to answer these questions is to take some representative sampling of criminals and see whether their criminality always causes, hastens, or increases the likelihood of their destruction. Offhand, though, it seems extremely unlikely that, were we to look at a representative sampling, we would see that criminality always causes, hastens, or increases the likelihood of the destruction of the criminal. What about the evidence of "dictatorships"? Well, consider the sampling of twentieth-century dictators that come readily to mind. The depressing fact is that most did quite well on the scale of staying alive. Hitler brought destruction upon himself, as did Mussolini and Ceaucescu. But all the Soviet leaders died in their beds, as did Mao, Ho, Hua, Franco, Salazar, Stroessner, and even Pol Pot. None of their deaths seem to have been advanced by their lack of personal productivity. Perhaps, though, Rand means to say that dictatorships are deadly for the people who are dictated to. That may be true; but most unfortunately dictatorships are at least as deadly to the productive as to the unproductive.

Consider this last passage from "The Objectivist Ethics":

Man cannot survive as anything but man. He can abandon his means of survival, his mind, he can turn himself into a subhuman creature and he can turn his life into a brief span of agony—just as his body can exist for a while in the process of disintegration by disease. But he cannot succeed as a subhuman in achieving anything but the subhuman—as the ugly horror of the antirational periods of mankind's history can demonstrate. (24–25)

That first short sentence embodies the equivocation that lies at the core of the Shuffle. This sentence is equivocal between: (1) the conceptual claim that "man's life" understood as man's staying-alive-by-way-of-man's-basic-means-of-survival ("his mind") requires man's employment of his basic means of survival ("his mind"); and (2) the causal claim that man's staying alive requires man's employment of his mind. I have predicted that having established her (but not my) satisfaction the conceptual claim—in the pivotal sentence that I discussed in section XI—Rand will go on to shift back from this conceptual claim to the causal claim. She will shift to the causal claim when she wants to conclude, not merely that the individual who fails to be rational, productive, and so will have a bad life, but that the individual who fails to be rational, productive, and so on will die. She will, I have predicted, shift back to the causal claim while ascribing
plausibility to this causal claim on the basis of not recognizing its
difference from the conceptual claim. In all the passages discussed
in this section, we do see Rand’s desire to conclude that the individual
who fails to be rational, productive, and non-parasitic will die. And,
so, we should see this shifting back to the causal claim.

The passage at hand supports this analysis. In the second
sentence of this passage, Rand comes as close as she ever does to
distinguishing between (what I have described as) the conceptual and
the causal claims. For she cites separately two purported conse-
quences of an individual’s abandonment of reason. One purported
consequence is “turning himself into a subhuman creature.” This
is the purported conceptual consequence of staying alive but not
staying-alive-by-way-of-reason.95 The other purported consequence
is “turning his life into a brief span of agony.” This is the purported
causal consequence of not staying alive (period). Now I am not about
to complain that the conceptual claim is plausible whereas the causal
claim is not. Putting the rhetorical “agony” aside, I think that both
claims are plausible. (We will return to this shortly.) Rather, my
complaint is that Rand offers almost nothing beyond the conceptual
claim to support belief in the causal claim and the conceptual claim
does not itself support the causal claim.

What does Rand offer in support of the claim that an individual
who abandons reason will “turn his life into a brief span of agony”? She
offers almost nothing beyond a reiteration of the conceptual
claim, “he cannot succeed as a subhuman in achieving anything but the
subhuman.” Well, we know—or, in any case, we are supposing—that a
human life requires staying-alive-by-way-of-reason; hence, if an
individual does not stay alive by way of reason, he does not have a
human life. But what it want to know is what supports the claim
that an individual who does not utilize reason will die (will turn his
life into a brief span of agony). The problem here is not that this
latter claim is false; it is that this claim is not supported by Rand’s
saying that “he cannot succeed as a subhuman in achieving anything
but the subhuman.” For this saying only tells us that he who does
not think will have a subhuman life.

I said that Rand provides almost no support for the causal claim
that non-reasoners die. She does seem to provide some support
when she concludes this passage with a gesture toward “the ugly
horror of the antirational periods of mankind’s history”—as she
previously has gestured toward men marching into the abyss and
towards criminals and dictatorships. If this allusion to antirational
periods is to support the contention that the abandonment of the
mind results in death, the point of the allusion must be that a higher
percentage of people have led short lives during these antirational
periods than in other periods of human history. This may well be
true. Unfortunately, however, it provides little to support the
contention that, for each individual, employing her mind, i.e., being
guided by reason, is required for staying alive. For, especially during
those “antirational periods,” employing one’s mind, i.e., being guided
by reason, might very well shorten one’s life. Given that lots of other
people were acting in antirational and life-shortening ways, employing
one’s mind might well have become a very dangerous strategy.50 The
Arians certainly were more rational in their theology than orthodox
Christians—and look what it got them. Giordano Bruno was more
rational than his sixteenth-century peers—and look what it got him.

Can Rand respond by saying that by employing one’s mind she
means being strategically rational in the pursuit of staying alive in the
particular circumstances that one finds oneself? Can she respond by
saying that those who have gone along—through silence or
prevarication—with dreadful intellectual or political regimes in order
to get along, i.e., in order to stay alive, have used their minds?51
Surely a response of this sort—which is necessary to preserve the
causal claim that, for each individual, staying alive requires his use of
reason—would be met by Rand’s declaration that “he cannot succeed
as a subhuman in achieving anything but the subhuman.” It would
be met by Rand’s insistence that what is really of value is refined
survival, staying-alive-by-way-of-reason. And just in virtue of our
understanding of what is really valuable, we can see that these
seemingly clever strategies are incompatible with the attainment of
ultimate value. What this shows—again—is that Rand’s appeal to the
conceptual claim that a genuinely valuable human life requires
rationality (and productivity and non-parasitism) is not and cannot be
a basis for the conclusion that staying alive requires rationality (and productivity and non-parasitism).

One final, lesser point needs to be made about this last passage. In this passage, only reason is cited as a basic means of survival. Productivity as a basic means of survival has dropped out of the picture. So nothing that Rand says here confronts the objection that, even if it is true that, for each individual, that individual’s employment of reason is required for her staying alive, it is not true that, for each individual, that individual’s productivity (or avoidance of parasitism) is required for her staying alive. Nothing that Rand says here about reason being required for staying alive confronts the problem of rational parasitism.

XIII. Two More Bad Arguments

The claim that each individual’s survival requires his being productive, i.e., that an individual’s being a parasite can never be conducive to that individual’s survival, is central to Rand’s articulation of her ethics and to Biddle’s exposition of it. So it is not surprising that one finds a variety of further attempts in the Randian literature to support this contention. Biddle invites us to consider in sequence two cases. The first is survival in isolation; the second is survival in society. Biddle points out that, if you are a Robinson Crusoe, you have to produce in order to survive. Then he points out that, in society also, things have to be produced in order for people to survive. From this, he seems to want to draw the conclusion that, in society just as in isolation, each person must produce in order to survive. He tries to suggest that, although in society one will typically survive by way of consuming goods that others have produced, one will only have access to those goods in society by way of exchanging things one has oneself produced. “So the fact remains: Whether alone on an island or among others in a society, if one wants to live, one has to be productive” (Biddle 2002, 54).

But when we look out into the world we seem to find counterexamples to this “fact.” We seem to find people who live by feeding off other people’s productivity. If all parasitic strategies we observe were pretty clearly self-defeating, we would be far less burdened by parasites in our midst than we actually are. In the face of apparent counterexamples to the causal claim that parasitic behavior results in loss for the parasite, Biddle makes the now all too familiar move. He shuffles over to a conceptual claim, viz.: “In order to live as a human being (rather than as a parasite), a person has to be productive” (55). By now, the worthlessness of this move should be manifest. The issue is whether or not it is true of every human individual that he must himself be productive in order to survive. We seem to have obvious, recognizable counterexamples before us when we look out into the world. We seem to see some individual human beings—recognizable as living human beings—who sustain their lives through parasitic behavior. We want to know whether what seems to be the case really is the case. It does not serve us in the least—it is, indeed, not much more than simple evasion—to declare that, whatever these individuals get from their parasitism, it is not “human life.” This is like defending the claim that all horses are black in the face of apparent real counterexamples (“this sure looks like a white horse”) by stipulating that one will refuse to call anything a horse that is not black.

Biddle’s argument is not strengthened by the introduction of the collectivist-sounding claims that human life as a whole requires human productivity, that “human life depends on productive work,” that “[i]n order to live, we have to be productive.” These remarks are true only in the sense that each individual’s continued life depends upon some people being productive. And, from that, it obviously does not follow that each person’s continued life depends upon his own productivity.

Another recurrent argument in Randian ethics attempts to invoke the value of self-esteem and the disvalue of the loss of self-esteem in support of the claim that this or that character trait or mode of behavior is required for individual happiness. In *Loving Life*, Biddle offers this type of argument to support the claim that happiness requires honesty and faithfulness (and the avoidance of dishonesty and unfaithfulness). The honest or faithful man is “able to respect himself”—indeed, his acting honestly and faithfully will enhance his
self-respect. The dishonest or unfaithful man is “unable to respect himself”—indeed, his dishonesty and unfaithfulness will diminish his self-respect (77). Since increases in self-respect bring with them increases in happiness, honesty and faithfulness result in greater happiness. Since decreases in self-respect bring with them decreases in happiness, dishonesty and unfaithfulness result in diminished happiness.

The problem is that this argument—like so many other arguments we have surveyed—entirely begs the question. To see this, let us get clear about what the question is. The question is not whether honesty and faithfulness ordinarily contribute to an individual’s happiness. Honesty and faithfulness ordinarily do. When they do, it is straightforward Randian doctrine that the individual ought to be honest and/or faithful. And when the individual ought to be honest and/or faithful (because so behaving increases his happiness), the individual has reason to be pleased with himself about his behaving in a way that increases his happiness. The resulting self-esteem will then, we are supposing, result in a further enhancement of the individual’s happiness. In a case of this sort, the self-esteem piggybacks upon the individual’s acting as he ought to in the situation, and the individual’s extra happiness piggybacks upon that piggybacking self-esteem.

It is perfectly plausible to hold that, when an individual has reason to act in manner X and does act in manner X, his self-respect is increased and, in turn, his happiness is increased (above what it would be without the self-respect bonus). But notice that in cases of this sort, the increased self-esteem and happiness depend upon the individual’s having prior and independent reason to act in manner X. To switch to a different (but familiar) zoological metaphor, the self-esteem and the additional happiness that results from it are parasitic upon the individual’s having independent reason for acting in manner X. If the individual did not have independent reason to act in manner X, acting in manner X would not enhance his self-esteem and, hence, would not result in any self-esteem-based enhancement to his happiness.

Now the real question at hand is whether the invocation of self-esteem helps to justify honest or faithful behavior in non-ordinary cases. These are the cases in which it seems (at least) that dishonesty or unfaithfulness will promote the individual’s happiness as much or more than honesty or faithfulness. These are precisely the cases in which advocates of the argument from self-esteem want to bring that argument in. For these are the cases in which that argument is needed. The relevant question is: In these cases, does the agent have reason to be honest or faithful in virtue of the self-esteem and self-esteem-based happiness that will result from his being honest or faithful? The answer to this question is, no.

For, if, as we are assuming in these non-ordinary cases, it seems (at least) that dishonesty or unfaithfulness will promote the individual’s happiness as much or more than honesty or faithfulness, then the individual involved will not have prior independent reason to conduct himself honestly or faithfully. And, if he does not have prior and independent reason to so conduct himself, he will not acquire increased self-esteem by so conducting himself and, hence, will not acquire self-esteem-based happiness. Self-esteem and self-esteem-based happiness piggyback upon an individual’s having a prior and independent reason to perform the action under consideration. Thus, in the non-ordinary cases, there is nothing for self-esteem and self-esteem-based happiness to piggyback upon. Therefore, in precisely the sort of cases in which increments of self-esteem and self-esteem-based happiness are needed to provide the individual with reason to behave honestly or faithfully, those increments will not be in the offing. In these cases, self-esteem and self-esteem-based happiness are invoked in order to show that the individual has reason to act honestly or faithfully. But the self-esteem and the self-esteem-based happiness will obtain only if there is a prior and independent reason for the individual to be honest or faithful. So, to think that there will be a self-esteem and self-esteem-based happiness reason to be honest or faithful is to presuppose precisely what one is attempting to show, viz., that the individual has reason to be honest or faithful.

The advocate of the self-esteem argument might try to fall back on the idea that it is good for one to instantiate and sustain in oneself the virtues of honesty and faithfulness, i.e., the general dispositions...
to tell the truth or to maintain one’s allegiances. The idea would be that, because an agent’s instantiating or sustaining one or another of these dispositions itself is either constitutive of his human good or indirectly productive of his good, the agent has a reason to act honestly or faithfully that we have not yet taken into account. Having this reason, the agent will enhance his self-esteem by acting on it, and the enhanced self-esteem will result in a bonus in the form of enhanced self-esteem-based happiness for the agent.

There is nothing wrong with this reasoning—except that it is entirely beside the point. For the advocate of the self-esteem argument needs to show that sometimes considerations of self-esteem and self-esteem-based happiness themselves provide an agent with reason to act honestly or faithfully—a reason which makes the differences in how the agent should act. But the appeal to the value of instantiating or sustaining virtues is nothing but an appeal to a previously unrecognized prior and independent reason for the agent to act honestly or faithfully. Whatever increment of self-esteem and self-esteem-based happiness results from an agent’s acting on this reason will be moral psychological lagniappe. As in all ordinary cases, considerations of self-esteem and self-esteem-based happiness themselves do not provide an agent with a reason that makes the difference in how he should act. Indeed, the nature of self-esteem and self-esteem-based happiness as piggyback phenomena shows that they can never make this sort of difference. They can never make the difference that the advocate of the self-esteem argument needs them to make.

XIV. Conclusion

Biddle’s Losing Life is replete with bad arguments. I believe that readers of Rand’s ethical writings will recognize these arguments. So, if I am correct about the badness of Biddle’s arguments, those readers should move pretty far toward the conclusion that Rand’s own ethical writings are replete with bad arguments. The most pervasive bad argumentation in Losing Life is Biddle’s commitment of the Shuffle; and perpetration of the Shuffle is also pervasive within Rand’s central discussion of the requirements of human survival. Although it is no news that there are problems in understanding exactly what stance Rand is taking vis-à-vis the ultimate value of survival and the requirements of survival, I hope that the analysis and critique I have offered of Rand’s discussion throw some new light on the problems that her exposition faces and on the points at which it stumble. My analysis and critique documents the persistent methodological defects within Rand’s argumentation.

Let me briefly sum up those defects. Rand wants to hold that the virtues which she commends are required for staying alive—because she wants to hold that those who do not abide by these virtues will die. However, the stronger case for these virtues—a case that is more advanced in her novels than in her ethical argumentation—is that their practice is constitutive of living a valuable human life, of achieving human well-being. Rand seeks to reconcile these two strands in her thought by holding that it is precisely because certain modes of action, especially rationality and productivity, are the basic means to staying alive that the ultimate end of man is staying-alive-by-way-of-reason-and-productivity.

Unfortunately, this attempted reconciliation stumbles at least at two crucial points.

First, in order to establish that reason, productivity, and so on are basic means of man’s (unrefined) survival, Rand has to establish that, for each individual, that individual’s being rational and being productive is required for her staying alive. But an inspection of reality simply will not support this contention. It is the failure of reality to support this contention which explains why Rand tends to shift over to the similar-sounding contention that being rational and being productive are required for (refined) survival. But, perhaps largely because she does not recognize her own shift to a different contention, Rand is not willing to pay the price of this shift. She is not willing to acknowledge that, given this shift, the ultimate evil is not death as such but not-staying-alive-by-way-of-reason-and-productivity. In any case, it is question-begging on Rand’s part to defend the claim that, for each individual, staying alive requires her engaging in reason and productivity by appealing to the claim that
acting by way of reason and productivity are constitutive of survival properly conceived. For this latter claim about how survival is properly conceived is itself supposed to be supported (within Rand's system) by the contention that, for each individual, staying alive requires her being rational and productive. So, again, the first point at which Rand's reconciliation of the unrefined survivalist and refined survivalist strands of her thought stumbles is the point at which she fails to support adequately the claim that reason and productivity are the essential means of man's staying alive.

The second point at which Rand's reconciliation stumbles is the point at which she fails to support her pivotal claim that, since reason and productivity are man's basic means of survival, man's ultimate end is staying-alive-by-way-of-reason-and-productivity. On analysis, the pivotal claim turns out to be the bare assertion that, since reason and productivity are man's basic means of survival, survival-by-way-of-reason-and-productivity is man's ultimate end.

I suspect that some readers of this essay will think that I have somehow unfairly looked at certain Randian arguments in isolation from other arguments and have, thereby, missed the way in which these arguments are mutually dependent and supportive. That is possible; although I cannot think of any place in the Randian literature where advocates of the arguments I have criticized have said: "So-and-so argument does not really stand on its own. Nor does such-and-such argument stand on its own. But they are mutually dependent and supportive in the following way." Sometimes when one feels that a critic has looked at arguments one is fond of in isolation from other relevant factors, the chief other relevant factor is simply how much one wants to believe in those arguments.

I also anticipate that some readers will be unhappy about my continual inquiry into whether Biddle or Rand is, at a given point, advancing a causal or conceptual claim and my continual carping that Biddle or Rand has not provided support appropriate for the sort of claim that is being advanced. These readers will think that, even if I have not fully returned to nefarious belief in a dichotomy between synthetic and analytic claims, I have foisted alien categories of analysis upon Rand's arguments—and then I have complained when those arguments do not faithfully comply with those categories. Part of my response to this is that the proof is in the pudding. I ask readers who have found plausible the arguments that I have criticized to look at them again in light of the distinctions I have drawn between different sorts of claims that Rand may be advancing and between different types of defenses demanded by these claims. I ask readers to look at those arguments again in light of normal demands upon an author to be precise about what she is asserting and about what the non-question-begging bases for those assertions are supposed to be.

Another part of my response is to agree that I have foisted alien categories of analysis upon Rand's arguments. Unfortunately, those alien categories are the basic norms of rational advocacy—clarity about what one's conclusions are, consistency in which conclusions one is arguing for, clarity about just what the premises for those conclusions are supposed to be, and avoidance of rhetorical flourish that substitute for reason and evidence.

In the introductions, I described this essay as a rescue operation—an attempt to rescue Rand's crucial ethical insights and her moral crusade for individualism, rights, and a free social and economic order both from her awful line-by-line argumentation and from the hostile and contemptuous tone of those pronouncements. One salutary effect of recognizing the inadequacy of much of Rand's argumentation in ethics is that one need not see others' failures to accept Rand's conclusions as Rand herself saw it, viz., as a mark of their willful irrationality and as a basis for hostility and contempt toward them. And when one begins to see that hostility and contempt are not an appropriate response to people's failure to be convinced by these arguments, one may both get on with the task of identifying better arguments and with distancing oneself from the hostility and contempt that so deeply color Rand's own argumentation.

Notes

1. Although I describe Biddle's work as a primer in Randian ethics, it is the only book-length work I know of that is devoted entirely to Rand's moral and political contentions.
a race of immortal, but sentient, beings.

10. I speak here clumsily about the nature of a type of living entity as though each type (each species) has a separate natural history and as though the appearance of new characteristics does not change the type of living entity in which that characteristic appears. Nothing in my argument hangs on this clumsiness.

11. The insistence on the all-encompassing dichotomy of Life versus Death as ultimate values is a major strand within Rand's Manichaeanism.

12. This problem also appears as the conflict between the survivalist and the flourishing accounts of Rand's ethical system. For a brief description of this and related conflicts, see Sciberras's *Ayn Rand: The Racian Radicals* (1995, 256–60). For philosophical defenses of the flourishing alternative, see Bhadra's *Is Virtue Only a Means to Happiness* (2001) and Long's *Reason and Value* (2000).

13. The alternative doctrine that I suggest requires, of course, that we can make reasonable judgments about what is and what is not constitutive of the well-being of individuals. An advocate of this alternative will eventually have to explain how robustly he can account for certain conditions being constitutive of and other conditions not being constitutive of individual well-being.

14. Biddle is reluctant to make the symmetrical claim that an agent's choice of death makes death his ultimate value. For, ther, he would have to face the fact that his position leads to the conclusion that there are two opposite but equally well-founded standards of value. Biddle tries to block the symmetrical claim by saying that the pro-life choice leads to a need for a structure of values while the pro-death choice yields "so much value" (2002, 47). But that there are many different conditions that lead death happens to shows that those conditions are not valuable for a-v-t-s-one's chosen goal of dying. So that there are many ways to die hardly shows that the chosen goal of dying would not equally count as an ultimate value.

15. In "The Objectivist Ethics," Rand (1964, 23) quotes Galt to the effect that, "[man] has to hold his life as a value—by choice..." But clearly this is the innocuous—albeit, not obviously true—claim that an individual will actually have his life as his ultimate aim only if he chooses to orient himself to that end. It is not the claim that the value of that end is *conferring on it* by its being chosen. On the other hand, the "subjectivist" or "voluntarist" choice doctrine does appear in Rand's essay, "Causality Versus Duty" (1970). In this essay, Rand rejects Kantian categorical duties, i.e., duties that are to be performed for their own sake. Unfortunately, she fails to distinguish between categorical duties and categorical ends, i.e., ends that are worth promoting for their own sake. Thus, she ends up also rejecting categorical ends whose value does not depend on their being desired or chosen. In this essay, the anti-Kantian ring of rejecting all categoricals—even categorical ends—drowns out the Humanum toll of doing so. Rasmussen (2002) provides an excellent treatment of Rand's anti-Aristotelian voluntarism. See also Sciberras 1995, 236–43.

16. This point is nicely made by Douglas Rasmussen (2002, 77) in his critique of the "voluntarist" reading of Rand on ultimate value.

17. In one respect, Biddle's position here and that of other followers of Rand who accept the choice doctrine is more subjectivist than Hume's. For Hume thought that the passions which determine the ends of human beings were constant, unchosen features of human nature.
18. See, especially, the first ten pages or so of “The Objectivist Ethics” in Rand 1964.

19. Pretty much just as I am writing the sentence in the text (27 September 2002), I am also reading that Lesi Reifenstahl is celebrating her one hundredth birthday.

20. Rand (1964) herself invites this move because, within two pages, she first says that “his own life [is] the ethical purpose of every individual man” (25) and then says, “the achievement of his own happiness is man’s highest moral purpose?” (27).

21. On this reconceptualization, if one is in an experiential state phenomenologically identical to the experiential state involved in this “happiness,” but that state has not arisen from one’s acting in the ways that constitute “human life,” then one’s experiential state is not “genuine happiness”; it is not “true happiness” (Biddle 2002, 49).

22. Advocates of causal claims of the sort we are considering could make do with somewhat more modest versions of these claims. They could, e.g., make do with the propositions that (a) each individual’s productivity has a strong tendency to promote his survival and each individual’s parasitic has a strong tendency to diminish his survival and (b) these tendencies are strong enough so that, for each individual, being productive is always the best bet for survival and being parasitic is never the best bet for survival. Given (a) and (b), one could hold that it is never rational for a survival-oriented individual to forgo productivity even though there are in fact particular situations in which an individual would more promote his survival by means of parasitism. Biddle seems not at all to pursue this more modest route. There is a hint of this route in the first passage from Rand that I examine in section XIII.


24. Here and in some of the preceding paragraphs, I make a simplifying assumption. I assume that any condition which is constitutive of an ultimately valuable human life is necessary to an ultimately valuable human life. The alternative possibility is that an ultimately valuable human life requires a sufficient realization of some, but not necessarily all, of the conditions that are constitutive of an ultimately valuable human life.

25. Unfortunately, the causal proposition within this respectable argument is not plausible enough. Hence, the overall argument I am describing for a reconceptualization of what is ultimately valuable, which would permit a conceptual defense of the claim that ultimate value requires non-parasitism, is not plausible enough. Recall that the point of presenting this argument is to show how one would proceed if one were philosophically consistent in one’s shift over to a conceptual defense. My own view is that the case for principled anti-parasitism must, at least in part, run through the wrongfulness of the rights violations involved in (most cases of) being a parasite. Considerations of other people’s rights have to come in; and these are not reducible to considerations of how valuable it is for an agent to treat people or to avoid treating people in certain ways. In this essay, I completely omit all discussion of Randian arguments about rights. For a discussion of felicitous versus non-felicitous developments of Randian insights vis-a-vis rights, see Mack 1998.

26. As the web analogy suggests, there is a continuum ranging from particular empirical claims at the periphery of the web, to every day causal claims, to high-theoretical causal claims, and on to what I have called conceptual claims at or near the center of the web. That there is this continuum does not, of course, justify jumping back and forth between claims that are at different places within the web.

27. With the possible exception of totally disabled persons?

28. What exactly is parasitism? Are cows parasitic on grass? Are human beings who drink cow’s milk or eat beef parasitic on cows? If so, are all these instances of parasitism wrong? What makes the bad parasitism engaged in by some human beings bad? Is it the fact that it involves inflicting losses on other human beings? If so, then the crucial thing that makes parasitism bad is not what it does to the parasite but what it does to the parasite’s victim. (See note 25.)

29. Why only if others are willing?

30. There is a mini-shuffle behind this premise itself. If we look at these apparently successful parasites, some of them will seem to be users of reasons. What do we do in the face of this initial finding? We stipulate that reason used in the course of parasitic behavior is not really reason. For the challenge from the possibility of rational parasitism, see the closing paragraphs of section XI.

31. The discovery that apparently successful human parasites are actually (i.e., literally) a subspecies of the dead is credited to Edwin A. Locke.

32. Roughly, the pages before this portion of the essay are devoted to establishing the ultimate objective value of “survival” and the pages immediately after this portion are devoted to Rand’s account of the virtues.

33. A more extensive examination of Randian arguments in ethics would check the premise that, for human beings, there are only two fundamental candidates for ultimate end, life (as unqualified survival) and death. If there are only two fundamental alternatives, it is plausible to say that life (as unqualified survival) and death are them. But why think there are only two fundamental candidates for the way of being that has ultimate value?

34. And there is a continuity of personal identity.

35. At some point, defenders of Rand will say that I have not appreciated the significance of Rand’s distinction between the Objectivist “standard of value” — which is “man’s life”—and the Objectivist claim that “his own life [is] the ethical purpose of every individual” (Rand 1964, 25). But what is this distinction? One possibility is that Rand is distinguishing between statements about what types of states of affairs are good for human beings at large and statements about which instantiations of those states any given person should pursue. So, e.g., being healthy is good for human beings at large, but a given individual should go for her own health. This is obvious, innocuous, and in no way ignored in my discussion. Another possibility is that Rand is distinguishing between asking what the good for “man” is and asking what the good for this or that particular man is. She is saying that first one has to identify the good for “man” and then one assigns to each particular individual the task of instantiating the good for “man” in his or her life. (The good of the individual is, therefore, defined as her instantiating “man’s” good.) On this understanding, the task of instantiating “man’s” good may not involve the individual in the same contexts or outcomes as she would have been lead to had she first asked what “her” good is. Nevertheless, her “ethical purpose” is this instantiation of “man’s” good in her life.
This is what Rand seems to be thinking (until she gets to the last clause) when she says:

“That which is required for the survival of man qua man” is an abstract principle that applies to every individual man. The task of applying this principle to a concrete, specific purpose—the purpose of living a life proper to a rational being—belongs to every individual man, and the life he has to live is his own. (25)

If this is what Rand means by the distinction between standard and purpose—and who can say for sure?—then I do not ignore the distinction in my analysis; I reject it. For, on this interpretation, Rand is not really holding that an individual’s ethical purpose is her own life; rather she is holding that the individual’s purpose is the actualization in her life of “man’s life.”

36. As a social-natural commentator Rand wants to accuse many people of surviving as parasites while as an ethical theorist she wants to say that it is impossible for anyone to survive as a parasite. It should be no surprise, then, that different senses of “survival” have to be brought into play.

37. An anonymous referee reminds me of another reading of Rand’s continual invocation of the generic “man”—a reading which Rand would view as ungenerous. On this reading, Rand is appealing to the Kantian test: Any agent’s acting in manner X is wrong if no rational agent can will that X-ing be a universal law. Since no rational agent can will that it be a universal law that people act parasitically, any agent’s acting parasitically is wrong. An even less generous reading of Rand sees her invocation of “man” and “man’s survival” as an invocation of the species-being man. The species-being man can only survive if the species-being man (through some of its members) is rational and productive.

38. When I talk about the point at which “Rand takes herself to be in position to offer a conceptual rather than causal defense of [a certain] statement,” I do not mean that Rand herself sees what is going on in terms of the distinctions I have drawn.

39. Perhaps the shift begins with the package deal offered in the passage from Galt. Galt’s contrast between being a “rational being” and a “suicidal animal” runs together the contrast between survival and death and the contrast between being rational and being subservial (animalistic).

40. Someone who objects to my overall parsing of Rand’s exposition will say that these paragraphs derive the one conception of human survival that Rand operates with throughout.

41. We have noted that Rand is drawn to a very simple model of what is valuable—a model that is also embedded in unrefined utilitarianism. The model is that there is a simple, homogenous ultimate end (survival, pleasure, utility) and that everything else that is valuable—including the virtues—is valuable simply as means to that end. Unwinding about this claim often leads those who begin with this simple model to try to incorporate the virtues, which are initially introduced as valuable means to a distinct homogenous end, into the ultimate end. The most obvious example is Mill’s attempt to argue that virtue becomes part of happiness. See Mill 1957, chapter 4.

42. In the second sentence, Rand only speaks of the most basic means of survival, reason.

43. The locution “proper to” is employed in the third short paragraph and twice more in closely following paragraphs. In saying that Rand is attempting to exploit the ambiguity of “proper to,” I am not saying that she is consciously intending this.

44. On the other hand, perhaps this paragraph should not be read as parallel to the second. Perhaps it just says that since thinking and productivity are the basic means for survival, thinking and productivity are the basic “methods” of survival (Rand 1964, 23).

45. By “reason,” Rand must primarily mean practical reason, not theoretical reason. The practically rational individual intelligently orders means to ends. The productive individual intelligently orders means to ends; but unfortunately so too does the rational parasite.

46. There is a standard second phase to this first stage response. It is that behind the appearances these people are miserable. They are racked with anxiety, guilt, and so on. I join in this wishful thinking; but I recognize it as wishful thinking. The argument that these people will be miserable because they will be self-condemning will be dissected in section XIII.

47. Who is more likely to put food on his table, Howard Roark or a thoroughly conventional architect? What makes Roark’s mode of life more valuable is not its greater likelihood of keeping Roark alive.

48. Note that the conceptual defense is lurking in the background. We are repeatedly told that those who attempt to survive parasitically are like animals; their existence is contrasted with that of “productive men” (Rand’s emphasis).

49. Rand, of course, does not merely say that this individual’s life is subhuman; she says that this individual is sub-human.

50. As usual, Rand’s casting her claims in terms of the generic “man” and “his mind” and “his survival” undermines precise thinking about whose use of reason (or productivity) is supposed to be required for whose survival. During certain periods of “mankind’s” history, “man’s” irrationality undermined “man’s” survival. But, during those periods, did each individual’s lack of rationality undermine her particular survival?

51. Were Rand to respond in this way, she would have to recognize the problem of rational parasitism. She would be in danger of having to endorse parasitism when it is the strategically clever course for an individual given her particular circumstances.

52. Notice that at least most Randians cannot support the claim that parasitism will not work for the parasites by pointing to the fact that aspiring parasites will suffer retaliation from the producers. For that retaliation must be justified. And, for the retaliation to be justified, there has to be an independent argument for the wrongfulness of the parasitic behavior.

53. We have noted Rand’s somewhat puzzling language of “man” and “man’s survival” back in section XI.
54. This common argument was offered by Nathaniel Branden in his talk at The Objectivist Center's 2002 Summer Seminar.

55. Throughout this brief discussion, I ignore complications that arise because an individual may think he has reason to act in manner X but be mistaken about that.


57. Of course, death plain and simple eliminates the possibility of refined survival. The question is: Is death plain and simple bad because it eliminates staying alive or because it eliminates the possibility of refined survival?

References


