Virtues and Meta-Values

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Recently, I was discussing virtues and values with Bob Bidinotto via Email. Mr. Bidinotto made a few comments that made me think back on my understanding of this topic. I realized that even though I had read a lot of Objectivist literature on this topic, I did not really have a clear understanding of how virtues and values fit with a philosophy of rational self-interest. The reason for this is that Objectivist literature appears to be contradictory. For example, when reading "the novels", I sometimes get the impression that the "heroes" are living a value-based life, but at other times it appears they are living a virtue-based life, or at least are placing a high value on virtues. In the past, I harmonized these seemingly contradictory ways of living as follows:

> *Objectivism is a value-based philosophy rooted in self-interest. Ayn Rand says that a value is that which one acts to gain or keep, and that virtue is the action by which one gains and keeps it. Each individual determines what is of value to himself. To obtain and keep a value, some actions work better than others. To act according to these is to be virtuous. Even when it appears that a person is placing more importance on a virtue than a value, it could be that that virtue has been predetermined to be the best way to achieve the value the person is after, even though in the short term it does not seem that way. Thus, when Roark prefers manual labor over compromising his building designs, it appears that the "principle of the thing" is what is important to him. But once you understand what he values – designing and building his own unique style of buildings – you realize that compromising his designs would not allow him to achieve this value. Thus, what appears to be virtue-based living is really value-based living.*

Remember that the previous paragraph was simply my attempt to make what appears to be a virtue-based way of life harmonize with a more appropriate value-based way of life. However, I have always been uncomfortable with its rationale. First off, manual labor does not in any way help one achieve the value of designing unique buildings. All it did was provide Roark a living while waiting for someone to give him an opportunity to design one of those unique buildings. It is possible that he could have gone to his grave without being given that opportunity. On the other hand, had Roark compromised a few building designs in the early stages of his career, it might have been that once he became known and respected as an architect, and he had more money, he could hold out for work that allowed him full control over his design. Plus, having a good reputation as an

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architect would give someone more of an incentive to hire Roark to design a unique structure. Many people in the real world do this very thing to get their careers started. Someone might point to Keating and say, "But look what happens when you compromise." The difference here is that Keating was NOT an original person. He could not design something unique if his life depended on it. Roark could. Compromising his designs early on in order to reach his goal would not have been non-virtuous on Roark's part. In fact, if virtue is the means to achieving a value, then compromising early in his career might have been the most virtuous thing he could have done.

All this, however, leads me to believe that there has to be more to the idea of virtue than just the means to a specific end. I could be wrong about what Roark should have done. Perhaps the course Rand had him follow was the best. Or for that matter, perhaps a course different from either of these would have been best. Because the best means to achieve a value is so uncertain, it is hard for me to think of these means as virtues. Rather, I think of them more as strategies. Many different strategies can work, but the best ones are highly specific to each individual in the specific circumstances under which he is striving to achieve his specific values.

This brings to mind the Kelley-Peikoff controversy. Peikoff claimed that Kelley was immoral for speaking to a Libertarian group. In other words, Peikoff thought that a value could not be achieved by Kelley's actions and that speaking to the group was not a virtuous thing to do. My question is: how the hell does Peikoff know this? For all he knew, Kelley's appearance could have been a major advance for Objectivism. Suppose a respected leader in the Libertarian movement had been in the group and was influenced by what Kelley had to say. Suppose this person further influenced others in this sphere to espouse Objectivist principles. You never know! The issue of whether or not Kelley should have talked to the Libertarians is not a matter of virtue, but a matter of strategy. And even Peikoff has stated (in a Ford Hall Forum when discussing who to vote for in a presidential election) that strategy is outside the realm of ethics, and that philosophical buddies can differ over strategy.

So then, what are virtues? I believe that virtues go beyond specific actions of specific individuals acting to achieve and maintain specific values. Virtues must be in the realm of the universal and thus pertain to all individuals. Therefore, I propose that virtues are the actions that are necessary for all individuals to take in order to gain and keep what I call meta-values. Meta-values are those that are primary and universal, not specific to any one individual. One such value, and perhaps the most important, is a societal atmosphere conducive to one's being able to pursue and achieve one's specific values. Thus, virtues such as honesty, integrity, justice, etc. are not necessarily practiced to achieve some specific value, but rather to achieve a much more important meta-value.

For example, suppose you are attempting to close a business deal. Through no fault of your own, conditions are such that if you are honest, the deal will fall through. Your specific value is to close the deal. Should you be honest or not? Well, to achieve the specific value of closing the deal, you would have to be dishonest. However, you realize there is more at stake than just the deal. You have many other values you are pursuing.

You want to live in a society that makes possible the pursuit and achievement of these other values. You realize that a dishonest society is not conducive to achieving these other values. So you decide to be honest and let the specific value of closing the deal go unachieved in order to make it possible to pursue and achieve other values.

Meta-values only make sense in the context of a society (i.e.- two or more people interacting with each other). Therefore, virtues only have meaning in this same context. If you are living alone in a jungle, who cares about virtues? You are the only one who could care and all you want to do is survive as best as you can. Some survival strategies will work better than others in different situations and you will want to discover what they are. But such actions would not be considered virtues, only survival strategies. Now, suppose you encounter another person and begin to interact with that person. You now realize that there is another volitional being (as opposed to just reality) that can affect the quality of your life. You also realize that for the two of you to effectively interact with each other, meaning that the two of you interact in such a way as to enhance each other's ability to pursue your individual values, certain "rules of conduct" are needed that you can both agree upon. These "rules of conduct" are virtues and they help the two of you to achieve a meta-value of an atmosphere conducive to each of you achieving your specific values. For example, each of you wants to know that the other person will be honest and fair in his dealings with you. These virtues apply to both of you and are thus universal. If you encounter even more people, you would want to bring them into your society and help them understand the importance of meta-values and the virtues that make them possible. As George Reisman has so eloquently pointed out, larger numbers of people lead to greater divisions of labor, which in turn reduces the cost of goods, which in turn makes it possible for people to achieve more of their individual values. However, this is only true in a virtuous society. If most people are dishonest, unjust tyrants, you would be better off living alone in a jungle.

Of course, there will be times when a person will be faced with an irrational situation wherein being virtuous will not be conducive to achieving or maintaining meta-values and must therefore be cast aside. Some examples include being confronted by an intruder asking the whereabouts of your jewelry, or during times of war, etc. However, using the definition of virtue I have presented, virtues would not so easily be cast aside when they interfere with the pursuit of a specific value. Virtues could only legitimately be set aside when an irrational force is striking at the heart of meta-values. Thus, if you must use force to stop an irrational person that is threatening you or your meta-values, then so be it. However, suppose you have a specific value of maintaining a business you have worked hard to build, but you find yourself in a position such that the only way to maintain your business is to betray a trusted friend. To betray him would allow you to maintain a specific value, but it puts you at odds with your meta-values. The meta-values are primary and thus override any specific values you might have. Therefore, you do not betray your friend and your business goes under. (For a good example of this very quandary, see the movie "All My Sons" starring Edward G. Robinson.) To others that have no understanding of meta-values, it appears that you are acting in a virtue-based fashion, standing by your principles in the face of a personal loss. However, in reality,

you are acting in a value-based way with an understanding that there are certain universal values that far outweigh specific values.

Many other examples could be given that illustrates how the pursuit of meta-values overrides the pursuit of specific values. However, I will stop at this point. I solicit anyone's input, pro or con.