

Ask Aristotle ... on Ethics!

Q: "After a shipwreck, you find yourself in a lifeboat that holds 50 people safely. Any more, it would eventually sink. There are 75 men, women and children currently on the boat of all ages, sexes, and social classes. There are another 100 in the water with no chance of rescue and no other lifeboats. You are nominated to make a decision as to make some people leave the boat, or allow more on the boat, and if so, who. Those left in the water will drown if you do not let them on the boat, but more on the boat will sink it. What would you do?"

A: Why is it that the true test of an ethical code, in the eyes of so many people, is how it would apply to an emergency situation? We don't live our lives on lifeboats and the validity of a code of ethics depends on how it applies to Man's life qua Man, not how it applies to a hypothetical situation that bears no relationship to life in a civilized society. There is much more to say on this subject, but I am going to defer to the expert—Ayn Rand. If you are serious about your question, I suggest that you read her essay, "The Ethics of Emergencies," which can be found in her book *The Virtue of Selfishness*. In it she covers this topic in great detail. Therefore, there is no sense in me duplicating efforts.

Regardless, I would like to thank you for this wonderful opportunity. As long as I am the one in charge, I am going to make the best of this situation. As this lifeboat will only hold 50 people, I choose myself and 49 of the most beautiful women, and then I order them to row the boat to the nearest deserted island where I live happily ever after.

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "Do you agree with Aristotle's view that all moral virtue is a mean between the extremes of excess and deficiency? What about the virtues of honesty and love?"

A: This is a very good question. In "Nicomachean Ethics" I explained how virtues cannot be prescribed exactly, but must avoid excess and defect. Quite often, my discussion of this point has been distorted and taken out of context. For example, in one instance, a modern day feminist, Jill Vickers, attempted to defend her views on socialism when she said, "As Aristotle said, all things in moderation." Thankfully, Leonard Peikoff corrected her by pointing out that I never said "all things in moderation" and then used an analogy of a healthy diet tempered with poison to illustrate.

As I hope you will see, my discussion must be taken in the proper context. When I discussed the excess and the defect of various virtues with respect to their mean, I in no way advocated tempering the application of any particular virtue with its opposite. In my discussion of the virtue of honesty for example, I did not suggest that being honest should

be limited by practicing a certain amount of dishonesty. My discussions dealt not with the extremes (e.g., always honest vs. always dishonest), but rather with the misapplications of a particular virtue. To continue using the example regarding honesty, the misapplications of this virtue are that of boastfulness and false modesty. In this case, the extreme at the top end of the spectrum to be avoided is that of boastfulness. That is, constantly going around bragging about oneself when not solicited. If the virtues of which you speak are true, they will be evident. This is not the same as advocating that one should lie. (Perhaps there was something lost in the translation of my works from their original language to English.)

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "If we are born without morals, what makes us acquire them? Do they develop naturally? If so, why do they differ?"

A: An explicit morality comes from the recognition that Man must have a code of conduct in order to live his life. As such, like all other forms of knowledge, it is something that must be learned (i.e., acquired by choice). And like anything else that is learned, it is subject to error. One might as well ask, "If we are born without knowledge of calculus, how does one acquire it? Does it come naturally? If so, why do people get the wrong answers to the story problems?"

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "Why was it morally right for Dagny Taggart to murder the guard in Atlas Shrugged?"

A: Before I can answer this question, we must first define our terms. Let us be clear on both the definition of the word murder and its context for this case. According to The American Heritage Dictionary, murder is the unlawful killing of another person. If we stop here, with only the definition to guide us, then we are still left with the open-ended question of "what is lawful" and furthermore "what is a legitimate legal code."

Beginning with the first of these-without getting to involved in legal science-it is common in western culture (and rightfully so) that it is legal to take a life if it is in self-defense or in defense of another person in response to the initiation of the use of force. Objectivism fully supports this idea and I will treat it as a given for the purposes of this discussion, because I believe it is safe to assume that you and our readers understand at least this much concerning the concepts of individual rights and the use of force. I will also assume that you are in agreement with me up to this point-if not, then you do not believe in an individual's right to his own life and there is nothing further to say.

This brings us to the second question: What about a legal code that does not recognize a man's right to defend himself (i.e., does not have the right to his own life)? Such a code is not a moral code because it is not based on the requirements of Man's survival. In Objectivism, morality is determined by Man's nature and what is proper for Man to survive qua Man. A legitimate society is one that recognizes this fact and establishes a code of law accordingly. Therefore "murder," for a society that does not recognize a man's right to life, would be a stolen concept. In the philosophical context of the word, murder can never be moral. Therefore, to imply that Dagny's action was both moral and an act of murder is a contradiction. The proper question-if it is not an act of murder-is "why was it moral for Dagny to kill the guard?" I.e., why is it NOT murder?

Let's take a look at Dagny's situation in this scene. John Galt, the man she loves and her highest external value, is being held prisoner by a dictatorial government and his life is in danger. Dagny is there to rescue him. Standing between her and her highest value is the guard in question-an agent of the oppressive government that does not recognize an individual's right to life. In order to save John Galt, Dagny must get past this obstacle. As she explains, "because it's your body that's barring my way."

But what if the guard is an innocent victim who is just following orders? To this I say "Just following orders" is never an excuse and anybody who uses this as their only defense is not innocent. In this case, what does it mean to be "following orders?" It means that one is part of the hierarchical structure of an organization. To the extent that a person is free to enlist or not-i.e., he is not being forced at the point of a gun-then that person is guilty of sanctioning the overall goals and philosophy of that organization, he has chosen to act on their behalf for their ends, he has pledged his agreement with their agenda.

If and when an organization begins to change its fundamental philosophy and commit actions that are immoral, then the proper response is to discontinue one's association with it. In the case of the guard, he should have turned in his weapon long ago and declared that he would have no part of this. If the consequences of doing so involved a threat to his own life, then he needs to realize-just as our forefathers did-that life under a dictatorship is not a proper way of life. He should sooner choose to fight for his life and liberty than surrender it to a subhuman existence. But he did not make this choice. That is now his problem, not Dagny's. The fact that he has made the wrong choice makes him her enemy.

Now let us ask the question "what if the guard is an innocent victim who does not know what the circumstances are?" Suppose Dagny tells him. Suppose she explains that an innocent man is being held captive and that his life is in danger. Would this make a difference? How could it? When Dagny gives him a choice to step aside or die, the guard is incapable of making a decision. If he cannot identify the facts of reality and come to a decision when his own life hangs in the balance, why should she expect him to react differently for the life of someone he does not even know?

Fundamentally, there is only one life each man should be concerned with and that is his own. And to concern oneself with his life means to take the necessary actions required to live. How does the guard's philosophy coincide with this idea? Ayn Rand uses this scene as

a literary device to illustrate an important philosophical point, a point that is a recurring theme throughout the novel. This is the idea that Man's life depends on his ability to think for himself and exercise his own judgment. When faced with making a decision or losing his life, the guard is still not capable of thinking for himself. Ayn Rand intends to concretize this point when she writes of how Dagny "pulled the trigger and fired straight at the heart of a man who had wanted to exist without the responsibility of consciousness."

If a proper code of morality is based on the requirements of Man's survival, then which of these characters was acting morally? The guard who could not make the simplest decision to save his own life and barred the way for Dagny to save the life of John Galt? Or Dagny, who took every action possible and necessary to further her life and save the life of the man she loves? Yes, it was moral for Dagny to kill the guard and the reason why is because it was self-defense, not murder.

Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle

[\[See Follow-Up From Politics...\]](#)

Q: "Can good exist without evil?"

A: Contrary to the relativist position, good is not defined on a spectrum in relation to that with which it coexists (i.e., its opposite). It is defined by that which is proper for Man's survival qua Man (i.e., that which it depends on). Therefore, speaking strictly from an existence vs. non-existence viewpoint, yes. For instance, a capitalist society can in fact exist without a neighboring dictatorship. However, in terms of possibilities, no. Since Man's life is the standard of value, and that which promotes it is good, it also follows that that which negates it is evil. While the existence of a dictatorship is not a necessity, the possibility of such is very real. As long as Man's survival is not guaranteed, both good and evil are necessary corollaries (not of each other, but of Man's life). If Man's survival were guaranteed, neither concept would have any meaning. However, it is important to note that it is not evil that makes good possible, nor vice-versa. Both exist only in relation to Man's life.

Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle