

# Ask Aristotle ... The Last!

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*Q: "What are the ethics of genetic engineering and what are the advantages and disadvantages of genetic engineering?"*

**A: To understand the ethics of any field of endeavor, one must first understand the role of ethics per se. Ethics is a science devoted to defining a moral code. A moral code is a set of values which define Man's choices and actions. But what is the standard for determining such a code? In Galt's speech in *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn Rand writes "Man must choose his actions, values and goals by the standard of that which is proper to man—in order to achieve, maintain, fulfill and enjoy that ultimate value, that end in itself, which is his own life."**

**Once one accepts that Man's life is the standard of all values, then one can easily understand that any actions or choices that work toward that end are necessarily moral. This being said, when one considers the life enhancing and life sustaining results of genetic engineering, one can only conclude that it is one of the most moral undertakings ever devised.**

**What are the advantages? There are many. Increased food production, better quality food, life saving medicines, increased standard of living, longer life expectancies, and much more. While this list is not exhaustive, it certainly shows how wonderful and beneficial this science is to Man's life.**

**As for the disadvantages. I know of none. There are only the scare tactics of the Man hating anti-technology zealots, environmentalists and the like. Their claims are completely unfounded and nothing more than arbitrary assertions with no basis in reality. So much so, that I will not even give them credit by listing them here. If there is a particular claim of theirs that you would like rebutted, feel free to ask a follow up question and I will reply.**

**Your Friend in Reason,  
Aristotle**

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*Q: "How you doin'?"*

**A: Joey! What are you doing on the computer?**

**Your Friend in Reason,  
Aristotle**

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*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**

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*Q: “Can machines think?”*

**A: Since thinking is a process that requires identification and integration, it is dependent on awareness of one’s self and reality. Therefore, it must be a faculty of a conscious entity. A machine, in its most rudimentary form, is merely a mechanical device capable of doing work. If one tries to extend this definition to include biological organisms in general and the human mind in particular, you could make the case that a machine does possess this capacity. However, extending definitions is dangerous. They must be finite and limited if they are to have any meaning. Just as saying “art is anything I want it to be” renders the concept of art meaningless, so do we lose the distinction between Man and machine if we do not limit the idea of machines to mechanical (and perhaps electronic) devices—i.e., the man made. As these devices do not possess consciousness, the answer is no—machines cannot think.**

**Your Friend in Reason,  
Aristotle**

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*Q: “Should I continue to smoke cigarettes?”*

**A: No.**

**Your Friend in Reason,  
Aristotle**

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*Q: "I have a question about genetic engineering. Suppose some farmers in an area are farming with genetically modified plants, while their neighbors do not. Then the next year, the company who modified the plants discovers that some of their own products are growing on the farms that had not been using their products before. The company then sues the farmers for patent infringement. The company claims that the organic farmers stole their product and have to pay for it. The organic farmers claim that the plants got there naturally and that the company should pay for their removal, because they only want to grow completely organic food. Who is right?"*

**A: First of all, this is not a question about genetic engineering. This is a legal question involving property rights. You can substitute any number of manmade products into this scenario, however genetic engineering just happens to be convenient for the sake of vilifying it. As is often the case when new technologies are introduced, people come up with myriad hypothetical scenarios as a means to vilify them, when in fact these scenarios have little to do with the technology itself. The implicit idea here is that manmade advances lead to hardships and conflicts among people in society, and that these cannot be resolved and will outweigh any benefits the new technology may provide.**

**As for the question of who is right, this cannot be determined from the little information that you have provided. You have indicated what each side claims, but you have not indicated what proof either side has to substantiate their claim. In a court of law, where this question should rightfully be answered if it were to ever arise, both sides would be required to state their case with facts, and the evidence would determine who is or is not at fault. Since each side is making a charge against the other, each will have the burden of proof to substantiate their respective charges.**

**Your Friend in Reason,  
Aristotle**

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*Q: "Dear Aristotle, After some research, I've found all the claims of Objectivist epistemology to be wholly undeniable and consistent, except for one. The one I cannot reconcile with myself is the validity of our sensory perceptions. To illustrate my dilemma let me use The Matrix the movie as an analogy. In the movie, humans are deceived into an alternate reality by having ALL their senses fooled by a computer, which, if you don't believe in souls, is theoretically possible. So, in keeping with the analogy, how can we be sure that ALL our senses are not being fooled and we are not in the matrix? If such were the case, any appeal to further sensory perception to check whether our senses were being fooled would fail. Thanks, Chris*

**A: Hello Neo...er, I mean Chris, Once again we are faced with the age-old argument of how do we trust our senses and know that we are not being fooled somehow. This argument has taken on many forms over the ages, from “how do we know we are not living in a dream” to “what if we are in a laboratory with electrodes stuck in our heads as the subject of a mad scientist.”**

**I don’t know what you mean by “after some research,” because I don’t know what such research would consist of if you have cast aside the validity of your senses. One bit of research you must have certainly overlooked is Leonard Peikoff’s discussion of this subject in his book, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*. He explains that if we could not tell the difference between a dream and reality, then the concept of dream would have no meaning and the word would not exist in our vocabulary. He also uses the analogy of the mad scientist to demonstrate how these arguments invert the hierarchical nature of concept formation. He explains that such arguments rest on doubting the self evident and readily available concepts in front of us such as rocks and trees and the like, yet take for granted higher level concepts such as electrodes and scientists and the fact that they can go mad.**

**I don’t know where you got the idea that it is theoretically possible for all of our senses to be fooled as portrayed in *The Matrix*, but I don’t believe it for one minute. Nor do I understand what believing in souls has to do with it. You imply that it is necessary to adopt one form of mysticism to fend off another.**

**Even if one were to accept that it would be possible to do this, there is a major distinction between the possible and the probable. And I certainly don’t understand how it would be probable for something like that to occur. Who would waste resources doing such a thing and to what end?**

**Ultimately, these false scenarios posing as valid arguments serve only one function: to cast doubt on Man’s ability to know reality. It is an attack against certainty and Man’s mind. One must first accept the validity of the senses as valid in order to pursue knowledge. This is an axiom and any attempts to deny it are self-defeating.**

**Your Friend in Reason,  
Aristotle**

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*Q: “Who is to say what perfect is? Is perfection not relative?”*

**A: It is not relative, but it certainly is contextual. The difference being that relative, in terms of philosophy, is the idea that reality is merely dependent on one’s point of view. Contextual means that it will depend on which facts of reality one is considering. To ask if something is perfect, one must also ask to what end, by what standard, and have proper definitions for the subject under consideration.**

When one talks about a “perfect circle” or a “perfect square,” the end being considered is merely existing as a shape qua shape, the standard of evaluation is how closely each fits its respective definition, and the definition is what makes the idea of perfection finite and limited. A circle is perfectly round if every point along a single curve is the same distance from a fixed point known as the center. A square is perfectly square if each side has the exact same dimension and all corners measure exactly 90 degrees. Who is to say what is perfect in this case? You might ask a mathematician or an architect.

When one talks about perfect health, the end being considered is sustaining Man’s life, the standard is that which promotes it, and the definition of health is to be free of disease or injury. Who is to say what is perfect in this case? You might ask your doctor.

What is the perfect pass in a football game? I would say that it would be a nice tight spiral that leaves the hand of the quarterback in such a manner as to connect with his receiver, who then catches it with both hands without bobbling it, and is able to score a touchdown. Is any one catch more perfect than any other? That question is meaningless. If they all meet the criteria mentioned with the intended result, then they are all perfect in that respect.

However, we must also be careful by what we mean when we ask the question “who says so?” In the previous examples, the person saying so was capable of doing so based on the fact that they have knowledge about that which is being evaluated. This knowledge implies a relationship between Man and reality. It implies that Man is capable of knowing and evaluating reality. It does not mean something is perfect merely because someone says so. That would be subjectivism.

There are those who claim that everything that exists is perfect in and of itself. Everything is perfect in its own way, and who is Man to say otherwise? Or quite often Christians will declare that only God is perfect. Both of these claims imply that perfection is something that Man cannot obtain or even know. It implies an aspect of reality that is independent and apart from Man’s consciousness. There is no definition, no standard, no limits, and therefore no knowledge possible. This is a form of intrinsicism.

In short, perfection is a human evaluation about a fact of reality. It depends on reality to exist (existence exists), to be what it is (A is A), and for there to be a standard of evaluation and a mind capable of evaluating it (consciousness is valid).

Is everything perfectly clear?

Your Friend in Reason,  
Aristotle

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*Q: “Can a person remain moral and happy in a corrupt society?”*

**A: It is necessary to address morality and happiness separately. These concepts do not necessarily depend on the same factors. To be moral is an act of choice. Regardless of the degree of corruption within a particular society, this still remains true. A man of intransigent mind and integrity can still act according to his principles to the extent that he is free to do so. To the extent that he is not free to do so, it is no longer a question of morality since his choice has been removed from the equation.**

**Happiness, on the other hand, is a psychological and emotional state that depends on many factors, many of which can be overcome in any society—corrupt or otherwise—and some that may not. To remain happy in a corrupt society will depend not only on the environment, but also on the individual’s ability to exist in that environment and his ability to integrate his evaluation of the society with the rest of his value hierarchy. If the individual’s family or his own person is subject to torture and persecution, it may be impossible for him to be happy. If that is not the case, his happiness can result from the fact that he is certain in his own beliefs and knows that evil can eventually be defeated. Ultimately, a person’s ability to be happy depends on their ability to cope with their circumstances and maintain a positive outlook on life.**

**Your Friend in Reason,  
Aristotle**

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*Q: “After reading one of Ayn Rand’s works, *The Fountainhead*, I cannot recall where she dealt with the situation of the economically dysfunctional, for example orphans, the mentally handicapped and suchlike persons. Reviewing the treatment of said persons [is] self-evidently the easy method of determining the success of a civilization.*

*If Objectivism is to be truly based on self-evident precepts, I would say honesty requires the believer to admit*

*1) existence is difficult,*

*2) philosophical pondering on this fact is the highest function of an organ nobody yet understands,*

*3) if we did not build the pondering machine ourselves, how can we know what drives it?*

*By looking at the results of our freedom? It is a fact that the economically dysfunctional are only well treated in societies that do not function according to Ayn Rand’s principles. Denmark, for example.”*

**A: I’d like to take this opportunity to quote Ronald Reagan and say, “well, there you go again.” Do you altruists get talking points for attacking Objectivism? It doesn’t seem to matter how many times I and other Objectivists address this issue, you people keep coming back with the same nonsense.**

**Before I go any further, let me first say that you can find this issue addressed on page 605 of hard cover edition of *The Fountainhead*, where Roark addresses the idea of housing the**

poor and condemns taxes as a means to doing it. However, it is important to impress upon you that the goal of Ayn Rand's fiction writing is not to address economic and social issues. The goal of her writing is the portrayal of an ideal Man. Whatever would dysfunctional orphans have to do with the life of Howard Roark, unless your unstated motive is to tear him down to their level by making him serve them? Is that what you mean to imply—that such men have no right to exist unless and until they serve their inferiors? This is the evil motive that is revealed when one strips away the veneer of “the public good” that you altruists always use to hide your true intentions of enslaving each man to every other.

Now what can you possibly mean by “economically dysfunctional?” This is a perfect example of the fallacy of the stolen concept. I must assume that you are referring to people who have a lower economic standing relative to others in society. But a person's economic standing in a free society is directly proportional to the degree that he is able to function. Don't you realize that these people are economically challenged precisely because they are *not functional*?

Aside from your mistaken notion of what constitutes the “self-evident” (*how can a higher level abstraction be on the same level as precepts?*), your claim that the treatment of these people is a measure of the success of a civilization is wrong on at least two accounts. First, the success of a civilization is determined by how well it protects the rights of all individuals regardless of their economic status. As is always the case with you altruists, you focus only on one group of people—the needy—and set aside the rest—the successful—as being irrelevant except as a resource to be used by the former.

Second, the economic status of any one individual is a measure of the ability of that individual only. It says nothing about the success of society as a whole. The economic success of the country as a whole is a much better measure, but it must first be kept in mind that it is not the collective wealth of society, rather it is the wealth of many individuals of whom the society is comprised. Society does not exist as a separate entity. It is merely the collection of all the individuals who live within it.

And if you were really concerned about the status of those dysfunctional people, then I would claim that a laissez-faire capitalist society is the only society that would properly serve their interests. However, this is not the moral justification of a society, it is merely a secondary effect. But it is true that they are better off in a capitalist society than any other. Just look at the miserable existence such people suffer through in a socialist society—as well as the miserable existence of all of the other members of those societies. It can be demonstrated that the degree of freedom within a society is directly proportional to the degree of economic prosperity within that society. It is no coincidence that America, being the freest society in the history of the world, has achieved the greatest degree of wealth.

I never ceases to confound me how socialists, like yourself, always use some insignificant European economy as an example of their utopia. If Denmark is such a shining example, why is it not an economic super power? Of course the obvious answer to this is that you are not concerned about generating wealth, only of redistributing it. Socialists are always fond of pointing out how their shining gems (whether they be Canada, Germany, Denmark, or

any other) have all the same advanced technology (with primary focus on medical care) as can be found in The United States. But what you fail to realize is that these technological advances would not even exist were it not for the existence of the Capitalist countries that were free to develop and create them. As Ayn Rand pointed out, wealth has to be created before it can be had or redistributed.

The short and simple answer as to how best to handle the unfortunate few—and they are few—who cannot function in a society through no fault of their own is that they should rely on the voluntary efforts of others through charity. Usually such people have friends and family to start with, and if that is not enough, then there has never been a shortage of goodwill in a free society. Prior to the social welfare programs that were established in our own country, such cases that genuinely needed help were rare, and the amount of charity necessary to help them was generous. In today's mixed economy welfare state, the number of people clamoring to get there "fair share" is greater than ever, and many people are unwilling to donate to charity because they feel they have already done enough after being robbed by the government via the tax system. Despite all of this, the amount of money that is donated to charity in this country is overwhelming, which goes to prove how benevolent free people really are, and is a testament to how much wealth we really have in our country.

Your Friend in Reason,  
Aristotle

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*Q: "Is a person born with shyness or do they choose to be shy?"*

*I have yet to obtain a girlfriend and I'm afraid I never will. Can Objectivism help me?"*

**A:** There is currently a great deal of evidence out there to suggest that certain personality traits, such as shyness, have genetic causes. Some scientists have even claimed to have isolated a shyness gene. However, as a psychological state, it would be irresponsible to say that is the reason for every individual case. For some people, shyness could be a result of childhood trauma or other psychological factors.

In either case, it would be difficult to say that one chooses to be shy. However, it is within one's power of choice as to whether or not you yield to your shyness or conquer it. The outward manifestations of shyness, such as not asking a girl to go out on a date, are willful acts of volition. As such, however scary or uncomfortable it may be to do so, one can still overcome or confront this social anxiety by taking action. It may be difficult to ask a girl out, but it is not impossible. And believe me, the reward is worth it.

**Can Objectivism help?** Well it certainly can hurt! If you were to adopt Objectivism and be consistently rational, you might not even have to go through the trouble of asking a girl out. She just might make the first move when she sees what a valuable person you are. But don't wait for that to happen. One of the problems is that even though she might like you,

**you might not like her in the same way. The only sure way to get what you want is to identify it and go after it.**

**Your Friend in Reason,  
Aristotle**

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*Q: "Is it rational to fear death?"*

**A: Fear is an emotion. As such, like any other emotion, it is an automatic response to something based on your hierarchy of values. Having an emotion is neither rational nor irrational. It is simply is. However, using your emotions as a guide to action is irrational because you are then substituting your emotional state for your faculty of reason.**

**Phobias are sometimes referred to as "irrational fears," but this is using the term irrational in a different context. In this case, irrational means causeless or baseless. It does not mean that someone has abandoned their rational faculty. Such fears may hinder one's ability to act rationally, but it is the extent that they are still able to think rationally that allows such people to recognize, deal with, and eventually conquer these fears—usually with professional help.**

**Now there is another way that this question can be taken to mean. While it is perfectly normal to fear dying in a life and death situation—in fact it would be abnormal not too—it is quite another thing to worry and dwell on the fact that one will eventually die and spend all your life worrying about it. If one does this, then he is essentially already dead because he is preventing himself from experiencing life and living it to its fullest.**

**If it is the case that one is spending a lot of time thinking about dying, then one should probably seek some help. It may be that such a person is not identifying or achieving sufficient values in his life. As ironic as it may seem, the more you fear death in this manner, the more you lack a reason to avoid it. As Ayn Rand once said, a fear of death is not necessarily a love for life. Also, in response to Phil Donahue when he asked her if she was afraid of death, she once replied no because, as she explained, "I won't be here to experience it."**

**Your Friend in Reason,  
Aristotle**