

What About Suicide Bombers? A Terse Response to a Terse Objection

Marc Champagne

On September 11, 2010, after presenting selected technical aspects of a Randian ethic at a prominent academic conference,¹ I was confronted with the following objection, somewhat belligerent in tone: “But what about suicide bombers?” What about them? Despite the objection’s contextual timeliness, my initial reaction was to question its topical relevance.² So I politely requested that the criticism be further unpacked. My interlocutor duly obliged, and I eventually gleaned that murder-suicide (say, in the name of some otherworldly posit) was being adduced as a supposed counterexample to the rational egoist account of values I had just expounded.

I don’t recall my exact response, only that I was dissatisfied with it afterwards. The audience member clearly thought he had unearthed a powerful criticism, and the objection, though crude, had the rhetorical merit of brevity. Such an intuitively attractive “sound bite,” I later thought, deserves to be answered in kind.

Tellingly, a similar objection to Rand’s metaethics was raised in the pages of this journal. Reviewing Tara Smith’s (2000) pioneering study of Rand’s metaethical ideas, Lester Hunt claims to have discerned some “curious implications” in her views. Upon describing the conduct of a violent wanton who would uncontroversially be classified as morally despicable, Hunt contends that “[t]he position that Smith adopts would seem to mean [. . .] that we can pass no moral judgments here at all,” since “[t]he individual involved happens not to desire the end (life) toward which distinctions of right and wrong are means” (2000, 109).

Although I have not attempted any kind of survey, I have found

similar instances of this criticism. Reviewing Tibor Machan's (1989) Rand-inspired defense of individualism, Paul Gaffney (1992, 79) writes: "One can say, hopefully, that suicide is not, for most, an urgent moral dilemma [. . .]. But if it is theoretically possible to opt out of the endeavor [of life] through a morally insignificant choice, it would seem to raise real questions about the status of one's choices within the endeavor."

The remarks by Hunt and Gaffney encapsulate well my objector's initial worry: if a suicide bomber thinks there is some suprapersonal/supernatural "good" that calls for his violent demise, how can someone committed to life as the standard of all value-judgments wedge a normative assessment in his ensuing action(s)? In other words, if, from a Randian perspective, "[m]oral 'imperatives' are [. . .] all of them hypothetical" such that "[m]orality rests on a fundamental, pre-moral choice" (Gotthelf 2000, 84), what can one possibly say about the criminal actions of those (hopefully, few) who do not "choose" to uphold the life-affirming antecedent of the pivotal if-then conditional whence all valuations flow? As Gaffney (1992, 79) put it: "[I]f I don't have to go to New York City in the first place, why am I blameworthy if I take the long way, or if I stop short and stay put?"

When presented with the idea that morality stems from life and that living is essentially a matter of individual choice, these objectors latch onto the voluntarism at hand, exploit the possibility that one might not choose to live, and then raise questions about the universalizability of moral claims. I believe their concern is misplaced, and betokens a profound misunderstanding of what Randian ethics are all about. Defenders of the starting position, however, typically respond by 1) further articulating the notion of choice and/or 2) introducing supplementary arguments to show how one can achieve universalizability after all (say, via an appeal to essential human nature). Alas, these responses on Rand's behalf only compound the confusion, since they grant the objection's basic rectitude. Accordingly, I want to gesture at a different approach.

In order to uproot the error involved, it may be useful to ask: who is this nondescript "individual" at the center of Rand's individualist philosophy? The often overlooked answer to this query is as simple as it is revolutionary: *me*. Stated otherwise: Rand addressed her entire philosophy to Marc Champagne (if that statement appears

provocative or conceited, then, as Rand was fond of saying, check your premises).

The pronoun “I” is an index—a sign-vehicle that points to its object according to contiguous circumstance. Hence, it always points to me.³ But an unfortunate prejudice (fostered by scholarly practice) enjoins us to supplant this benign semiotic device with something more contentful. On this gloss, Rand’s individualist ideas apply to Bob, Sally, Patrick, Abdallah, etc. This slide, however, fatally corrupts Rand’s distinctive advocacy of egoism.⁴ For once the transition to an external vantage has been effected, it is only normal that one will find the behavior of suicidal “holdouts” puzzling. After all, aren’t they individuals too? If so, then their refusal to cherish their own life would seem to bar one from evaluating their actions.

This is the mistaken inferential pattern I ran into. The reasoning, in essence, is that if the suicide bomber’s own embodied existence here on earth does not matter to him, no evaluation can be made of his other choices, and he thereby becomes morally impregnable. This confused line of reasoning, however, completely fails to notice that *there is no I “over there,”* and that the only “self” that is relevant in this or any other situation is *my own*. Solipsism does not follow—other minds genuinely exist; but we have a whole range of pronouns for those.

The actions of a suicidal maniac who wants to take others down with him in a bloodbath are therefore not at all “neutral” or “amoral.” Much the opposite, since I (Marc Champagne) passionately want to live/flourish, those actions are as bad as bad objectively gets.⁵ So if one truly comprehends Rand’s ethical philosophy, it becomes clear that the most appropriate response to a terse objection like “What about suicide bombers?” is a confident and equally terse assertion “But, I don’t want to get blown up.”

Notes

1. The paper, “Organisms, values, and umwelten: Locating normativity in the natural order,” was delivered at *Nature and Human Nature*, annual conference of the British Psychological Society (Consciousness and Experiential Psychology section), St. Anne’s College, Oxford (11 September 2010). The full text appears in Champagne (2011).

2. I confess that I am always suspicious (and somewhat irritated) whenever one appeals to “exceptional” or “hard” cases in order to undermine a general claim about a normal state of affairs (for a similar view, see Rand 1964, 49–56). Coupled with a

default policy never to let an opponent commandeer the meta-philosophical terms of the debate, this ingrained distaste made me weary of engaging with the questioner's objection. This short piece belatedly remedies that dereliction.

3. Interestingly, Rand was fully aware of the indexical character of the first-person pronoun: "Whatever road I take, the guiding star is within me; the guiding star and the load-stone which point the way. They point in but one direction. They point to me" (Rand [1938] 1999, 109).

4. That the reflex to universalize is non-conducive to a defense of ethical egoism should be apparent from the fact that detractors of the view use such universalization as their pivot. Proceeding from the (correct) egoist thesis "My own happiness is the sole good," G. E. Moore accuses the thesis of being inconsistent by claiming that "What egoism holds, therefore, is that *each* man's happiness is the sole good" ([1903] 1960, sect. 59; quoted by Huemer 2002, 261). In spite of the inferential marker "therefore," nothing licenses the slide in quantifiers from "my own" to "each" (see Champagne 2011, 25–27).

5. Hunt's suggestion that "there can be no moral reason for punishing such a [harmful] person" (2000, 109) is thus beside the point, since what is at stake is a straightforward containment/prevention of physical force. Rand's morality is not about redeeming lost souls via punitive or pedagogical measures, but about going on with the business of "living" in an unobstructed way (Rand [1957] 1999, 713). There is perhaps some story to be told for why dangerous criminals do the things they do; but, like the protagonist of *Anthem* (Rand [1938] 1999, 109), "I know not and I care not" what it might be.

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