



Sense-of-Life

The Psychology of our philosophy of life

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I met a girl at a dance, and fell in love with a look... a gesture... a crisp, dark voice. How can this happen instantly? If you believe, as I do, that it takes a long time to really know someone -- what makes possible this lightning sense I had about this woman who is now my wife?

I went to Carnegie Hall, and jumped out of my seat repeatedly in rhythmic pleasure at a performance of a choral/orchestral work of unimaginable force. The work, *Carmina Burana*, by Carl Orff, consists of bawdy Latin lyrics about defrocked monks and various unpleasant medieval subjects. I know no Latin and I detest most everything medieval, yet a good performance of this work will always move me to strong emotion. How can this happen? What makes this intense emotional reaction possible in the face of reasons not to like it?

What makes possible these instantaneous reactions, whether happy ones, such as the first example, or exciting ones, such as the unlikely second example?

The answer is: the *psychological mechanism* of "sense-of-life." Sense-of-life is a subconscious way in which you hold your philosophy of life -- how you hold your view of the world, and your view of people around you. It is a special aggregation of your emotional history, stored in your subconscious over your lifetime. Thousands of impressions and events from life, thousands of conclusions about people, thousands of experiences of yourself in relation to the world -- physically, mentally, psychologically, socially -- all are stored in your mind as you grow up, and this forms a characteristic way of looking and judging everything around you.

Ayn Rand identified this feature of human inner life as an emotional summing up of our life that each of us develops and holds about the world and one's place in it. It's a view that everyone develops subconsciously, every day of our lives. And the result becomes a persistent pattern of emotional response about most everything we encounter in life and art and people. We all recognize such psychological patterns in people we might know:

- the go-getter, optimistic saleswoman acquaintance who grabs life and pushes to keep making those sales
- the pessimistic, life-is-hell relative who is a persistent grouser about life's slings and arrows
- the acquaintance who believes he has a special station in life that is his birthright, and nothing he does, no matter how bad, can change that "right"
- the risk-averse person at the job, who only feels comfortable working in a safe union job that she hopes gives her life tenure.

All of these simple examples illustrate aspects of a person's personality that develop from emotions we have in our life about things we encounter, and that result in a characteristic way we look at the world and react to it. What we usually call "personality" can be thought of as the outward expression of an inner sense-of-life. The Oxford Dictionary of Psychology provides a lucid and simple description: "The sum total of the behavioral and mental characteristics that are distinctive of an individual." So, while personality is a different concept, it is clear how close a cousin

it is to the phenomenon of sense-of-life. Ayn Rand's concept helps explain what personality means when describing people.

Sense-of-life is a concept that is central to Ayn Rand's work as a novelist and as a philosopher, so one is inclined to think she *had* to identify it. It is at the crossing point of a) character (what a good novelist thinks about a lot), and b) the ideas that create one's character, and c) the complex processes within our rich subconscious faculty which we still only understand slightly. It is an idea that other thinkers have mentioned or struck upon in a less exact way. But Rand was able to combine her abilities of abstraction with her great ability to clarify details of human character, to result in giving the concept a definite, concrete meaning. In order to explain her theory of art and to explain her psychology of romantic love and sex, she *had* to make this human mental phenomenon clear, and we will look at these *applications* of the concept, at the end of this essay.

From all indications, she came upon this concept as part of her own development of her philosophy, and never mentions any previous writers' use of the idea. Other thinkers have recognized this important feature of the human mind, in varying degrees.

Jose Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher (in his book *On Love*, in the essay *The Role of Choice in Love*, written c. 1919) refers to this concept as "metaphysical sentiment" which he defines as the:

"...essential, ultimate, and basic impression which we have of the universe."
 "This acts as a foundation and support for our other activities, although its degree of clarity varies from person to person. It encompasses our primary, decisive attitude toward all of reality, the pleasure which the world and life hold for us. Our other feelings, thoughts and desires are activated by this primary attitude and are sustained and colored by it. Of necessity, the complexion of our love affairs is one of the most telling symptoms of this primogenital sensation. By observing our neighbor in love we are able to deduce his vision or goal in life...." (p.92-93 of Greenwich Editions, 1958)

Another Spanish writer/philosopher, Miguel de Unamuno, in his book *The Tragic Sense of Life* (English edition, 1921), has a description of this human mental attitude and phenomenon, but it is less clear, and only focuses on a "tragic" version. Also remember, the use of "sense-of-life" here is a translation from Spanish, and could also have been translated as "emotion of life" or "life emotion" or "life sentiment". Whatever the variations, they all point to the same underlying fact that Ayn Rand is referring to in "sense-of-life". As Unamuno says:

There is something which, for lack of a better name, we will call the tragic sense of life, which carries with it a whole conception of life itself and of the universe, a whole philosophy more or less formulated, more or less conscious.
 (p. 33 of Project Gutenberg, 2005, ePub edition of 1921 Macmillan edition)

Unamuno, while being able to describe the idea of a metaphysical sentiment -- of a sense-of-life -- holds an intensely negative view of the human mind in that book. This puts his whole approach in diametrical opposition to the view of man's mind in Ayn Rand's work. And Ayn Rand develops the concept of sense-of-life with much more detail and accuracy than anything in Unamuno's book.

My meeting of my future wife illustrates one of the remarkable aspects of a sense-of-life -- it is, in a rough and ready way, a mental capacity which assesses massive amounts of information about a person or situation in the briefest of meetings. Recent research in psychology strongly suggests that our snap judgments are remarkably accurate as a first pass, and that many people can depend on those snap judgments to be borne out by more information (a minute later or a day or a year). This mental phenomenon is known as "thin slicing" and studies have shown strong evidence that only seconds of conversation or a momentary glance can result in estimates that are quite accurate, and are frequently more accurate than multi-minute or multi-hour analyses of people.

Sense-of-life makes possible the well-known phenomenon of "love at first sight" as in that meeting I described. But the equally remarkable aspect is that it takes years for a sense-of-life to be formed and solidified, and takes years for another person to grasp someone's sense-of-life in all its fullness. Why? A sense-of-life consists of so many thousands, tens of thousands of concrete emotional judgments in a person's life, that in

order to ever be fully confident of another's worldview and emotional reaction to life's events, you need to, over long experience, be able to deconstruct that overall sense-of-life character into many of its constituent parts. That's how one can fully *get* someone's sense-of-life. Of course, to the extent that one's own sense-of-life matches another's, in many details, the easier one can get to that point of really knowing another's sense-of-life, down deep.

Unlike any past ideas of what a sense-of-life is, Ayn Rand provided a detailed description and definition of this psychological phenomenon. She most expansively wrote about it in two 1966 essays: *Philosophy and Sense of Life* and *Art and Sense of Life*. (Originally in her journal: *The Objectivist*, but more commonly available in her book *The Romantic Manifesto*.)

Her statement of sense-of-life is:

"It is a pre-conceptual equivalent of metaphysics, an emotional subconsciously integrated appraisal of man and of existence."

A sense-of-life is a *psychological mechanism*. The human mind has a variety of built-in capacities, or faculties, that we use to perceive and think about the world, much as we have various bodily built-in capacities to digest food, to breathe, to control our musculature, etc. Some bodily mechanisms are automatic, some are mechanisms that we as individuals have to develop, such as various controls over how our body moves and operates. Similarly, in our consciousness, there are automatic functions (such as our senses taking in an array of information from the world around us, or our emotional mechanism that instantly evaluates a situation and reacts). There are faculties we have to develop and perfect, such as coordinating our perceptual focus with our movements. And with our conceptual faculty, we have to consciously learn the meaning of words, connect these words into coherent sentences, form logical chains of thought, and perform similar mental acts to actualize that conceptual potential (the conceptual faculty) of our minds.

A sense-of-life is one of those mechanisms that operates automatically, and is a basic type of integration that the human mind performs "under the hood". Ayn Rand once put it that a sense-of-life is a silent adding machine tallying up what you consider important in your life, and each tally is an answer to these and other basic (philosophical) questions:

- Can I be sure of what I know?
- Is the universe a stable, coherent causal place or is it a chaotic flux?
- Am I able to live a moral life?
- Is happiness possible to man?

A sense-of-life is a sense about yourself that you automatically, emotionally develop from countless observations and value judgments and emotional reactions over years - about the world around you and the people in it. Because we all come with a capacity to think, to understand the world abstractly, to conceptualize, we have this mechanism that takes these daily results of our thinking-and-feeling and enters them into a ledger, a database, a spreadsheet (use a metaphor of one's choice here), and totes them up into an ever-growing summation of your life's experience and basic conclusions about the world.

The result is that a sense-of-life is a subconscious, emotional way in which we hold our personal philosophy. Ayn Rand in her essay, *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, (1973) showed that everyone has a philosophy, whether they know it or not, and your only choice is whether you explicitly identify it, or not. Whether one is an intellectual, or a professional, or an ordinary "Joe", or a ditch digger -- we all have a philosophy we live by -- though many of us do not think about it in clear terms. This fact we all share -- having a philosophy -- arises because the nature of the human mind as an integrating mechanism inevitably results in everyone having implicit answers -- answers we have adopted without thinking through them openly -- to the basic questions about how to live on this earth. We must do this -- use our minds -- in order to live. Sense-of-life is an important concept connected to our philosophy of life, because a sense-of-life is a mechanism that continually sums up one's *emotional reactions* to the basic issues of our morality, our certainty about our mind and our relation to the universe.

A sense-of-life is a pre-conceptual equivalent of metaphysics, an emotional subconsciously integrated appraisal of man and of existence.

By *pre-conceptual* she meant, this is not self-aware, it is primarily in one's subconscious, and operates by means of an automatic feature of the human mind. Since perception is also pre-conceptual, I believe she used "pre-conceptual" to include both such inner, subconsciously-generated processes, and outer-oriented perceptual processes, as an all-inclusive term that refers to the human conscious capacities of perceiving the world, and organizing our evaluations of the world.

By *equivalent of metaphysics* she is not literally speaking of metaphysics. Metaphysics is a major branch of philosophy dealing with questions about the nature of existence -- Do things exist? Do things have an identity (or can they randomly change)? Is the universe causal? -- and so on. But by saying it is an "equivalent", she is pointing out that this psychological phenomenon is not literally a group of philosophical positions you are holding -- because they aren't explicitly or deliberately held as concepts. A sense-of-life is a way our consciousness holds an emotional sum about the whole world around us. Our minds do not work in a way that lets us hold all our ideas, conclusions and emotional history in a huge pile that we can just simultaneously look at and see all the components. But it does have a ready, valuable substitute for such an impossibly large history -- a sense-of-life that gives us an instant reaction to some event or person, and this reaction is based on who we are in total -- what our life and conclusions have been throughout our life.

The second part of her statement, *emotional subconsciously integrated appraisal of man and existence*, can best be clarified this way (from back to front):

Appraisal of man and existence: This again refers to metaphysical issues -- the nature of existence, the nature of man. And "appraisal" makes the point that these are value judgments about metaphysical issues. Not issues such as whether you prefer blue or green, or chocolate or butterscotch ice cream (though some might consider this metaphysical, at a light moment in life!), but rather judgments about your place in the universe:

- Can I know things?
- Am I competent?
- Is the world causal?
- Is morality possible?

Subconsciously integrated: This points out that the process is one that is part of the natural integration that the human mind does as a characteristic feature, as a type of built-in, unlearned, mechanism of human consciousness. It is a non-conceptual type of integration (a not-focused-upon, not overtly thought-about type of integration) which simply keeps tallying up the emotional reactions you have in life, and the importance you place on those emotions.

Emotional: A sense-of-life is based on a long series of emotions you've experienced about important events in your life. And a sense-of-life itself is experienced as an over-arching emotional reaction to people and events in your life, thus the description.

Therefore:

A sense-of-life is a pre-conceptual equivalent of metaphysics, an emotional subconsciously integrated appraisal of man and of existence.

APPLICATIONS

One rare, clear presentation of how a sense-of-life develops and influences everything you do in life -- is the story of the rise of Gail Wynand in *The Fountainhead*. The destructive path that Gail Wynand takes is clearer when you pay attention to the sense-of-life clues that Ayn Rand provides (see p.405-431, hardcover or Kindle), which culminate in Wynand's push for power over people in a scene when, as a young man, he meets an editor he admired. He concludes -- upon seeing this editor betraying any journalistic integrity -- with the value judgment (in both emotional and conceptual form) that morality is impossible to man. So anything goes -- and all that there is left to choose is to be a victor or a victim. Anyone who has read this book knows what Wynand chose.

In Ayn Rand's esthetics, "*art is the selective recreation of reality according to an artist's metaphysical value judgments.*" *Metaphysical value judgments* are another way of identifying a person's sense-of-life. The content of a sense-of-life is the countless subconscious metaphysical value judgments that the artist made over the years, and is then used by the artist, either subconsciously, or both subconsciously and consciously, as the *standard of selection* for what he puts in his artworks. If he selects characters for a screenplay who are drug-addicted and mental drifters, this is what he is selecting as *important* in life. If he selects for a sculptural subject the biblical David overcoming the invincible opponent, Goliath, that is a whole different set of metaphysical value judgments -- that is a whole different sense-of-life. Similarly, a person *beholding* the artist's work will automatically, subconsciously, use his own sense-of-life, his judgments about the nature of the world, as a *standard of value* for his "thumbs-up" or "thumbs-down" feeling about the personal value of that artist's work. If he is repulsed by a screenplay about drug-addicted drifters, he will walk out. If he is repulsed by the larger-than-life vision of a man who overcomes an impossible force (David beating Goliath), then he will be unmoved by such a work, and walk out to find something more fitting to his sense-of-life. For a detailed discussion of how one's sense-of-life controls one's response to art and controls the artist's vision, see *Art and Sense of Life* by Ayn Rand.

Ayn Rand also used the concept of sense-of-life to make sense of the highest loves of one's life -- whom you are attracted to, romantically, or in deep friendships. By being able to glimpse at a person's innermost self-made soul -- however soft focus this perception may be at first -- you are looking at his or her sense-of-life, at his or her entire character, at his or her entire person. This sense-of-life is expressed in the arrangement of lines in their face, their posture, their gestures, their actions, their speech, their *everything* which is perceivable. And conversely, if you are very unattracted to someone you meet, you again are responding to all those outer clues of their inner sense of how the world works. For a detailed discussion of how a sense-of-life controls one's response to romantic partners, see *Philosophy and Sense of Life* by Ayn Rand. Although the entire article is a crucially important explanation of what a sense-of-life is, the last third focuses specifically on its relation to who you are attracted to in life.

In an important way, our sense-of-life is the seat of our individuality and a way of understanding the uniqueness of each person. What makes us an individual is the summation of our life of experience and judgments and thought -- and that is stored in our consciousness, and we call it a sense-of-life. This concept, when fully understood, gives deeper meaning to what it means to be an individual human being. And it is perfectly fitting that Ayn Rand would identify it clearly in her philosophy, since Objectivism is pre-eminently the philosophy of individualism.

[Home](#)

