

Intellectual Power Tools

Tools, Techniques & Ideas
for Applying Objectivism

FOCUS

"The primary choice, according to Objectivism, the one that makes conceptual activity possible, is the choice to *focus* one's consciousness."

— Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand (OPAR)*

In New Hampshire—twenty-six miles north of where I live—the state motto, “Live Free or Die,” is prominently displayed on automobile licence plates issued by the state. Some in New Hampshire don’t like it—thinking that it sounds too strident, too definite, too warlike. Most citizens of the state, however, still like the ring of those independent words. They harken back to the days when Americans fought for that principle.

I discovered an even more potent motto at a seminar I attended. The speaker handed out blue campaign-like, pin-on buttons, with the motto, “Focus or Die.” To the best of my knowledge the speaker was not an Objectivist. But she was serious about those three words. They were the theme of her presentation. She had described a universal truth: without focus, you cannot live as a human being. But why? And what is *focus*?

Consider this. “Until a man is in focus, his mental machinery is unable to function in the human sense—to think, judge, or evaluate. The choice to ‘throw the switch’ is thus the root choice, on which all the others depend.” (Leonard Peikoff, OPAR, p. 59)

I once heard a recovering alcoholic tell how he literally rose from the gutter. He was a homeless man who one day woke up with his head facing the gutter, lying in a dried-up pool of blood and vomit. “I opened my eyes,” he said, “and looked at the gutter and my vomit. At that moment, as if I had turned on a light switch in my head, I knew I was going to die—unless I did something. I slowly crawled out of that gutter.” He was ready to face the daily struggle of putting his life back together. He had taken responsibility for his life. He was ready to think. He sought the help and guidance of rational human beings. He was in focus and determined to stay that way, day by day.

What is focus? It’s not the same as thinking. It comes before thinking. It makes thinking possible. It is human volition in action—one’s choice to put one’s brain in gear. In the example given above, the man in the gutter came face to face with a choice: do nothing and die, or focus and live. He had no idea *how* he would rescue himself, only that he must find a way. Yet it wasn’t simply the reality of the gutter that made him focus. Others have woken up under similar circumstances and continued to evade thought and action. It was something more. It was something he did. He *chose* to focus.

“*Focus* (in the conceptual realm) names a quality of purposeful alertness in a man’s mental state.” (Peikoff, OPAR, p. 56) Or as Ayn Rand phrased it, “But you are not free to escape from your nature, from the fact that *reason* is your means of survival—so that for *you*, who are a human being, the question ‘to be or not to be’ is the question ‘to think or not to think.’” (*Atlas Shrugged*, p. 939)

Literally, the man above made the decision to think. His eventual recovery began with that first exertion of mental effort. All purposeful, productive human action starts from the same root source—focus. (I urge you to read Dr. Peikoff’s discussion of *focus* in OPAR) — KW.