

WHY OBJECTIVISTS SHOULD DEBATE WITH OTHER LIBERTARIANS: A DISCUSSION OF DAVID KELLEY'S *TRUTH AND TOLERATION*

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TRUTH
AND
TOLERATION

by
David Kelley

David Kelley's monograph *Truth and Toleration* (Institute for Objectivist Studies, Verbank, NY, 1990) was written in response to his being excommunicated from the official Objectivist movement. Objectivism is the name coined by the late Ayn Rand to describe her system of philosophical ideas. The official movement now falls under the auspices of Leonard Peikoff, her designated heir. Kelley was expelled for being prepared to have debates with libertarians. The official movement regards this sort of thing as anathema, for they think that debating with opponents is equivalent to providing them with a moral sanction.

Kelley's book largely outlines his views concerning the nature of Objectivism and how it should be applied, and he contrasts his interpretations with those of Leonard Peikoff and Peter Schwartz of the official movement. However, Kelley has provided an interesting theory of how we ought to relate to those with whom we disagree, regardless of what our own views are. He does this while using Objectivism as a specific example. For this reason it makes a good read regardless of whether you happen to be an Objectivist or not. For illustrative purposes, in this review I shall assume that Objectivism is true. So I shall make only the occasional and minor critical remark about Objectivism.

ERRORS OF KNOWLEDGE VERSUS ERRORS OF MORALITY

Not only do I broadly agree with Kelley's theory of how we should relate to our opponents but I also think that it accords with how Objectivism ought to be applied on the basis of its own principles. In other words Peikoff's and Schwartz's accounts, as described by Kelley, are not consistent with Objectivism. But I would also say, which Kelley does not, that Peikoff's

and Schwartz's views are not far removed from those of Ayn Rand herself as expressed through her personal behaviour and in the general tenor of her writing. In other words, Rand, herself, failed to apply her philosophy properly.

The essence of the flaw in Rand, Peikoff and Schwartz is that while Objectivism asks you to learn to distinguish between errors of knowledge and errors of morality, Rand, Peikoff and Schwartz tend to identify virtually all errors of knowledge as errors of morality. This is why almost all who disagree with Objectivism, particularly intellectuals, are considered evil. Kelley regards this sort of thing as intrinsicism. In ethics intrinsicism holds that what is right and wrong inheres in certain things or authorities regardless of the consequences for human wellbeing, and must be accepted as duty. It is characterised by the designation of certain texts, such as the Bible, whose teachings must be accepted, or else. Thus religious authoritarianism is a type of intrinsicism. Peikoff is an intrinsicist because he holds that what is true or false, right or wrong is self-evident and does not have to be discovered by a process of thought.

The problem with Peikoff's view is that on the one hand he thinks that Objectivism is a profoundly innovative achievement which required a great mind to produce, but on the other hand he expects all intellectuals to be able to arrive at the same conclusions as Rand did. To the extent that they do not they must be dishonest and therefore evil. This is intrinsicism because it implies that the truth or falsity of ideas is easily revealed to anyone who is familiar with the basic laws of logic. Against this, Kelley argues that arriving at philosophical conclusions is a complex process and it is possible to make many honest errors on the way. Therefore, when debating with opponents we must be prepared to devote a considerable amount of time to explaining our case and understanding the reasons for our opponents' advocacy of their own case.

MORAL JUDGMENT

With respect to the issue of moral judgment Kelley indicts Peikoff on two major counts. (1) Because of Peikoff's intrinsicism he is too quick to pronounce the judgment "evil" when responding to opposing or even only slightly differing viewpoints. (2) He pays insufficient attention to context so that he tends to fail to

Philosophical Notes No. 22

ISSN 0267-7091 ISBN 1 85637 108 5

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
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The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

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distinguish between, say, an armed bank-robber and a pickpocket.

Kelley thinks that in judging an action, apart from merely pronouncing it good or bad, we need to consider the motive for the action and the context. But it can take time to examine these in sufficient detail. For example, there is a difference between lying to a burglar and lying about a job application. The former action is justified but the latter is not. Nevertheless, it is still worth trying to find out *why* someone is lying about a job application in order to see whether his behaviour is typical or atypical.

Because we need to gather a certain amount of information in order to fairly judge someone we have to consider whether it would be worth our while to do so. Often the answer will be “no”, unless we think we might enter into a well-developed relationship with that person. Short of a full investigation we are justified in drawing conclusions from whatever evidence we do have, subject to their future revision, to the extent that our judgments are important for our goals. But simply calling people evil for the slightest transgression is not likely to be a very successful strategy. Yet, claims Kelley, this is what dogmatic Objectivists habitually do. This is intrinsicism because these Objectivists feel they can judge a person *in toto* on the slightest of evidence.

Another point Kelley makes is that moral judgment is not an end in itself but only a means to an end. Moral judgment is required only to protect us in the pursuit of our values. If I hire an electrician to rewire my house I need only be concerned that he live up to the terms of our agreement. His personal beliefs and life-style are irrelevant in this respect.

MORAL SANCTION

The next major question Kelley discusses is that of “moral sanction”. Objectivism holds that evil is important in itself and can survive only with the aid (the sanction) of the good. Therefore it is important that Objectivists do not aid the evil. Objectivism holds that the good can aid the evil either willingly, through misguided compassion, say, or unwittingly. In the latter case, the evil manages to disguise its nature by the use of vague assertions or incomplete truths, and so fools the good into supporting it. Presumably, a good example of this latter would be the widespread support there appears to be for various environmental causes - environmentalism being a cocktail of a movement comprising truths, half-truths and downright lies, sometimes openly admitted to be such.

In Objectivist terminology “sanction” is used to cover both questions of good and evil and of truth and falsity. In fact, Objectivists generally identify “good” with “rationality” on the one hand, and “evil” with “irrationality”, on the other. I think this usage is both

strange and problematic but for the purposes of this essay I shall stick to it.

That the evil can only triumph with the assistance of the good is, I think, roughly correct with respect to political ideologies and special interest groups, say, and in terms of the long-run success of evil. But it’s clearly false with respect to individuals, and in terms of the short-run success of evil.

For example, if some thug were to break into Leonard Peikoff’s house and murder him, then we would say that the evil, the thug, had prospered at the expense of the good, Peikoff, but Peikoff would not have sanctioned the thug’s act in any way.

Objectivists believe that they should not compromise with evil or false ideas. To guard against the unwitting, as opposed to the willing, compromise with evil Objectivists would presumably say that it’s just a matter of being on guard and improving one’s reasoning skills.

Kelley does not dispute this Objectivist principle but he thinks that its practice requires a certain amount of sophistication. He holds that dogmatic Objectivists interpret this principle as implying that they should not debate with their opponents or even appear at conferences at which their opponents might also be speaking. It is specifically on this issue that Kelley was expelled from the official movement. His sin, among others, was that he dared to debate with libertarians.

THE VALUE OF DEBATE

Kelley attacks this interpretation on three counts. (1) Debating with our opponents does not imply that we agree with them. (2) Debate is necessary because we can learn from debating with our opponents. (3) It is almost impossible to avoid benefiting our opponents at least indirectly even if we do not debate with them.

Consider the last point. If I save some money in a bank this will provide additional funds which will enable my ideological enemies to obtain cheaper loans. In fact, if an Objectivist purchases any commodity he is certain to benefit irrational people since virtually no sellers are Objectivists. Thus if Objectivists were concerned not to benefit irrational people in any way they would all starve to death.

Now let’s consider points (1) and (2) in more detail. To the extent that an intellectual movement is interested in spreading its ideas it is bound to encounter debate even if it does not actively arrange debates. If it spreads its ideas solely through publications then people who are interested are almost certain to raise problems unless they miraculously agree with everything they read. Short of miraculous and instant agreement we can envisage two different responses. A reader can disagree with a publication to such an extent that he feels no need to pursue the matter any

further. Or a reader can find the ideas quite stimulating and want to know more. In this latter case he is almost bound to have many problems and questions to ask. And in the process of becoming a possible convert he is obviously going to converse with existing members, either in writing or in speech. Assuming that the official movement wants to recruit such a person it is obviously going to have to debate with him.

It seems that dogmatic Objectivists are prepared to acknowledge the need for debate only in regard to persons who are not well-trained in the world of philosophical and political ideas. Intellectuals, including libertarians, have no excuse for not being able to see the obviousness of Objectivism, and if they reject Objectivism they are immoral because Objectivism is clearly true.

In fact, Peter Schwartz does not entirely rule out debate with libertarians. He says that if they want to learn about Objectivism they should “come to us”. Presumably, if this happened Peikoff and Schwartz would sit down and outline the principles of Objectivism, and if instant agreement were not then forthcoming the visiting libertarians would be sent away as hopelessly irrational and that would be the end of that. But if Schwartz thinks libertarians should come and see him to learn about Objectivism why does he not think that he should visit them to teach them about Objectivism? The reason must be that Schwartz is basically afraid of debate and fears that he might end up learning something from libertarians rather than vice-versa. One is really left with the suspicion that Schwartz is not very serious about his offer to libertarians to “come to us”.

Even if Objectivism is right in expecting intellectuals, if they are honest, to arrive at Objectivism the dogmatic Objectivists seem to be denying that Objectivism required any great intellectual breakthrough to create. As noted earlier, on the one hand they hold Rand to be a great thinker and innovator, and on the other they expect all intellectuals to arrive at the same conclusions she did. In those cases where they do not think that people can automatically arrive at Objectivism they may “allow” disagreement until Objectivists have had a chance to explain their case. But once this has been done any subsequent disagreement by the non-Objectivists is regarded as immoral. Rand herself does not seem to have been immune to this tendency.

But it is simply unrealistic to expect instant understanding and agreement. Grasping new ideas can be a long and difficult process. It is difficult enough in the natural sciences but it is much more difficult in the social sciences, infused as they are with the diversity of value judgments and the complexity of social data.

Even if a philosophy is true its adherents can learn from debating with their opponents because opponents provide a different context and ask questions which

the philosophy’s adherents have not asked. The philosophy may not have asked those questions because it thought that the solutions were obvious, or it may simply have overlooked the problems. In either case if the philosophy can cope with the problems this actually strengthens the philosophy. The point is that people who adhere to a true philosophy may not require as complete an elucidation of that philosophy as nonadherents. But if nonadherents are able to pose problems not explicitly addressed by the philosophy but which the philosophy can answer then those solutions become part of the intellectual ammunition of that philosophy. They strengthen the philosophy because the new solutions remove more potential objections to that philosophy, thus making it easier to persuade future opponents.

Although when we develop new ideas or try to solve problems we engage in a certain amount of critical thinking to ensure that our ideas have no counterexamples, we are inevitably selective. We are biased towards cases for which our ideas work. That is why debate is invaluable because opponents frequently raise problems we have not considered. So even when our ideas are right we have something to learn.

Finally, it could be the case that Objectivism is in error and needs correcting, and that opponents of Objectivism can correctly identify those errors. To dogmatic Objectivists this is unthinkable. But things can often seem obviously true until someone thinks of counterexamples. The assumptions about space and time in Newtonian mechanics seemed self-evident until the creation of the theory of relativity. What usually happens when a new theory replaces an old one is not that the reasoning in the old theory was wrong, but that the old theory had assumed certain assumptions to be unproblematic or that the theory had failed to consider some other relevant factors. Willingness to engage in debate and being prepared to alter our views does not imply that we should never admit to being right. We admit to being right while at the same time being prepared to acknowledge our errors if they are exposed. Ayn Rand admitted as much somewhere. We should not fear debate for if we are right we have nothing to fear but if we are wrong we have something to learn.

OBJECTIVISM VERSUS LIBERTARIANISM

What Peikoff and Schwartz dislike about libertarianism is that it is a broad church comprising many differing views of the basis for liberty. From Kelley’s evidence this seems to be their main objection, rather than the fact that libertarianism includes anarcho-capitalism as one of those views. In fact, libertarianism also includes Objectivism, though Peikoff and Schwartz would deny this. Yet to the extent that libertarianism includes minimal statism it clearly includes Objectivism as one set of views. There are also Ob-

jectivists who think that anarcho-capitalism, not minimal statism, is the logical political consequence of Objectivism.

It seems that Peikoff and Schwartz do not want to make common cause with anyone, even if a particular group's or person's views differ only marginally from Objectivism. At the same time they seem eager to pronounce such people evil. To make common cause is, for Peikoff and Schwartz, to endanger the purity of the Objectivist system. Yet all that is required is that diverse ideological strands may sometimes cooperate for delimited political objectives. There need be no presumption that the diverse groups are united on everything. There is virtually no difference in the essential political, as opposed to philosophical, principles of Objectivism and libertarianism (especially minimal state libertarianism).

The main difference between libertarianism and Objectivism as total systems is this: libertarianism is concerned to define the scope of allowable human actions, e.g., the voluntary exchange of all goods and services. Within that scope it does not say anything about how people should behave. Objectivism is also concerned to define the scope of allowable human actions. And so far as it does its principles are more-or-less those of libertarianism (excepting the anarcho-capitalist wing), though among libertarians themselves and between libertarians and Objectivists the justification of the principles varies. But the main difference is that, additionally, Objectivism specifies the lifestyle which human-beings ought to follow. This is why libertarianism is broader than Objectivism. There is no reason why Objectivists should not try to persuade libertarians that they also need the Objectivist ethics in order to justify the political principles. To do this they must be prepared to engage in debate. One would have thought that Peikoff and Schwartz would at least be prepared to work towards the achievement of a more free market society and then concentrate on providing it with an Objectivist basis. But if they insist on intellectually excommunicating anyone who shows the slightest degree of irrationality as they see it, their particular Objectivist movement can expect to remain no more than an irrelevant rump. Few will sign up for the sort of movement which Peikoff and Schwartz think is appropriate for achieving a free society.

OBJECTIVISM, "EVIL" AND "IRRATIONALITY"

Peikoff admits that, in his view, Objectivism is closed-minded and intolerant and believes these are virtues. Kelley is more open-minded about Objectivism and is more tolerant towards opponents than Peikoff. But he is still prepared to conclude that opponents can be evil or dishonest or irrational. For Kelley, opponents are irrational when they become evasive, or resort to *ad hominem* attacks etc. However, what Objectivism as a

whole does not say is what the evil or irrational person is supposed to do after Objectivism has pronounced him evil or irrational. Is there no way out of his predicament? It seems to me that it is still possible to reason with someone even after he has been pronounced evil or irrational. For example, we can simply point out that the person is resorting to an *ad hominem* attack. Of course, there is never any guarantee of success in dissuading someone from evil or irrational behaviour, and economics dictates that we should normally spend less time trying to debate with people who do not want to debate.

However, I have never liked the habitual use of the word "evil" by Objectivists. There are very few people (as a proportion of the population) whom I would be prepared to call evil. "Evil" conjures up an image of extreme wickedness. But most wrongdoers are wrong in just a few aspects of their behaviour. The extent and degree of wrongdoing are clearly significant in how we should respond to transgressors. Simply calling someone evil is not really very helpful and is certainly unlikely to dissuade that person from his behaviour. The best way to deal with such a person is to focus on the particular actions which are disagreeable and to try to persuade him that those actions are wrong, perhaps by showing how those actions clash with other actions which the wrongdoer himself feels are wrong. If we insist on calling both a pick-pocket and Hitler evil then this suggests that we do not see much difference between them. For example, Schwartz regards libertarians as the moral equivalent of the former Soviet regime. But, as Kelley points out, if libertarians are no better than Soviet dictators then Soviet dictators are no worse than libertarians. This is obviously absurd.

Kelley admits, commonsensically, that there are degrees of irrationality or evil. But he does not really deal with situations where Objectivists are forced to conclude that certain people, such as the intellectuals who supported Stalin while knowing about the concentration camps, are evil. To the extent that such people are open to debate (and openness to debate is a matter of degree) one must actually call them rational on Kelley's criteria. I think part of the problem here may be the Objectivist conflation of "evil" with "irrational". This conflation is mistaken but I do not wish to pursue the point here.

There is much in Kelley's book which I have neglected to discuss. Most of what he has to say I agree with and most of the things I disagree with I have not bothered to mention at all. That is because those things are usually to do with aspects of Objectivism, and I have purposely been concerned not to criticise Objectivism as such in this review, but rather to outline Kelley's views on how we should interact with our intellectual opponents.