



LEONARD PEIKOFF'S *FACT AND VALUE:* A CRITIQUE



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In Philosophical Notes No. 22,¹ while praising David Kelley's book, *Truth and Tolerantion*,² I criticised Objectivists,³ Leonard Peikoff and Peter Schwartz, for adopting an intolerant attitude towards their intellectual opponents. Since then I have learned of Objectivists who have taken issue with me on my stance. I have been accused of shooting off without having read either Peikoff or Schwartz. In this regard, I have encountered only one piece of explicit criticism, to which this essay can, in part, be considered a response.

I will admit at the outset that the accusation of not having read Peikoff or Schwartz was true. I have since made good this deficit. I have read Peter Schwartz's booklet, *Libertarianism: The Perversion of Liberty*⁴ and his essay, "On Moral Sanctions";⁵ Leonard Peikoff's book, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*,⁶ and his essay (criticised extensively by David Kelley), "Fact and Value".⁷ I shall here deal mainly with this last. (A brief critique of Peter Schwartz's essay, "On Moral Sanctions", is included as an addendum to the current critique because Schwartz's essay was itself written as an addendum to Peikoff's.)

My critique will not be exhaustive because I do not wish to merely parrot the admirable arguments already advanced by Kelley, though some duplication is unavoidable. (A critique of Schwartz's booklet is the subject of another essay.)

FACT DOES NOT IMPLY VALUE

My reading of Peikoff has not caused me to change my views. Indeed, the main conclusion I have drawn from "Fact and Value" is that it contains few facts and little value. In contrast to Kelley's careful and rigorous arguments Peikoff's are remarkably slipshod; though, to be fair, Kelley, because he wrote a monograph, had much more space in which to develop his arguments. "Fact and Value" (which was written prior to Kelley's monograph, and was a

reply to an earlier essay by Kelley) is intended as an argument against Kelley's views on matters such as moral judgement, tolerance, intellectual error and evil.⁸ But it is couched in general enough terms to be accessible to anyone not familiar with the specifics of their dispute. In the course of his argument, Peikoff raises a number of interesting points, almost all of which are false. It is rare that one encounters a piece of writing, by someone on the same side of the political spectrum as oneself, in which virtually every point is mistaken.

For example, Peikoff asserts (p. 1) that "every fact bears on the choice to live" and later, more restrictedly, "every fact of reality *which we discover* [italics mine] has, directly or indirectly, an implication for man's self-preservation and thus for his proper course of action."

The original statement is obviously false. But the restricted statement is too. For example, if someone tells me that there is a red car parked two streets away from me, the truth or falsity of this claim need have *no* implication for my behaviour whatsoever. It would have implications *only if* it were relevant to my current plans.

Yet, in general, even facts which *are* relevant to our current plans may be disregarded simply because it is impossible to take account of all the facts that are presented to our awareness. We do not have the time or the resources. We have to concentrate on those facts that we think are the most important. Some minor facts which could be of value to us may require us to engage in so much thought that such thought would interfere with our use of those facts which are perceived to be far more important.

PURE KNOWLEDGE CAN BE VALUABLE

Peikoff writes (p. 1): "Cognition apart from evaluation is purposeless; it becomes the arbitrary desire for 'pure knowledge' as an end in itself."

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This is false. It rules out, for example, pure science and mathematics as worthwhile activities. People study these subjects out of the desire for pure knowledge, simply because the subjects are *interesting*. However, it is not the case that in doing this they are engaging in cognition without evaluation. It is because they find these subjects intrinsically fascinating that they evaluate them as good. Studying these subjects serves their mental wellbeing. We might add here that in mathematics, for example, there are obviously a large number of facts that have no relevance to the life of most people in the world, even if they were to know of such facts. Such facts comprise those areas of pure mathematics that have no current application to reality.

SO-CALLED “ARBITRARY” STATEMENTS ARE EITHER TRUE OR FALSE

Another error by Peikoff is his claim that certain statements are neither true nor false but “arbitrary”. This argument also appears in his book.⁹ Peikoff is here making two claims.

The first claim is that the epistemological status of a statement is dependent on the state of consciousness of the being that asserts it. So statements uttered by a parrot cannot be considered true or false. Nor can statements uttered by human-beings in a parrot-like fashion.

This is a strangely *subjectivist* viewpoint. A statement is true “if and only if” it corresponds to the facts. This is the so-called Correspondence Theory of Truth,¹⁰ subscribed to, incidentally, by Karl Popper, and adhered to by Ayn Rand in *Philosophy: Who Needs It?* (unfortunately I don’t have the exact reference). Peikoff does claim to follow the Correspondence Theory of Truth in his book¹¹ but he appears not to understand it at all. For example, he writes: “There can be no ‘correspondence’ or ‘recognition’ without the mind that corresponds or recognises.” This is true. But all it means is that in order for someone to see whether a statement is true or false he must grasp its correspondence to reality — he must be able to validate it. It does not mean that, if I make a statement which I cannot prove (but which does, in fact, correspond to the facts), the statement is neither true nor false. Correspondence to the facts is a purely objective matter. A statement, in reality, either does or does not correspond to the facts. My mental state, or my ability to validate the statement, is completely irrelevant.

Suppose I make the statement: “within mathematics there are true statements which cannot be proved to be true.” This is a true statement. (It is an informal statement of Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem.) But I personally cannot validate it. However, objective procedures do exist which *can* validate it. Thus its truth or falsity has got nothing to do with the fact that I myself cannot prove it.

Even regarding statements which cannot be validated by anyone it is still the case that they are definitely true or false. For example, consider the statement: “There is a black hole at the centre of our galaxy.” There is no procedure currently available that permits us to validate this. But it is clearly a meaningful statement which is either true or false.

Peikoff’s second claim is that arbitrary assertions such as “a convention of Gremlins is studying Hegel’s *Logic* on the planet Venus” are arbitrary *statements*, that is, neither true nor false. Peikoff here confuses the *assertion* with the *content* of the statement. It is the *assertion* that is arbitrary. A statement such as the above *is* itself either true or false. However, we cannot prove that it is false which is, I think, why Peikoff holds it to be arbitrary. Nevertheless, the appropriate response should be to regard it as false on the grounds that no evidence is presented in its support.

(In fact, we are not totally at a loss with respect to these sorts of assertions. We can give good reasons for expecting such statements to be false. For example, we can cite objective evidence regarding the unsuitability of Venus’s atmosphere for the support of life, to the extent that our “asserter” provides a description of that life in familiar terms. In other words, the more explicit the Gremlin be-

liever is in his description of Gremlins, the easier it is to advance arguments as to why he is mistaken.)

ERRORS OF KNOWLEDGE ARE COMMON

Peikoff claims (p. 2) that “every identification of an idea’s truth or falsehood implies a *moral evaluation of the idea and of its advocates*”. This statement implies that if an idea is false then its advocate is *necessarily* evil. We cannot conclude that the exponent has merely made an error of knowledge. Thus although it is true that Peikoff does, shortly after this, explicitly distinguish between errors of morality and errors of knowledge, the above statement gives an indication as to where his true feelings lie. It also explains why *in practice* he regards virtually all errors of knowledge as errors of morality. Genuine errors of knowledge are, it is alleged, confined to the young — to “groping teenagers” (p. 3).

Yet even in these cases Peikoff demands that anyone who has made an error should make amends for it. Why? If it is an *innocent* error it should be sufficient to admit that the error was made and to carry on with one’s life. (If that error led to practical consequences, such as physical harm to persons or property, that would be a different matter. In such a case the offender would be obliged to pay damages to the victim, either directly or via insurance. However, in the present context, Peikoff is concerned solely with the holding of erroneous ideas.) Again, one suspects that Peikoff does not really want to allow any errors of knowledge. This suspicion appears to be confirmed when he cites the example of an employee who comes up with a “stupid suggestion, which flies in the face of the facts”. According to Peikoff the employer must think not just “false” but “bad” and must conclude that the employee was “out-of-focus”. What about the possibility of innocent error? Is the truth always obvious?

Peikoff later resorts to determinism in claiming that “the effect [of Kant’s ideas] when they are injected into the cultural mainstream has to be mass death” (p. 3) and: “Without the philosophic climate Kant and his intellectual followers created, none of these disasters could have occurred; given that climate none could have been averted.” (p. 4) As Kelley rightly points out, Peikoff overlooks the fact that people were, and are, free to choose or reject these ideas. There was no *inevitability*. Also, there is no reason to suppose that *only* Kant could have led to Auschwitz and the Gulag.

Peikoff next comes up with an example in which his evaluation is almost exactly the wrong way round. He claims it is OK for me to wish you were dead, even though you are totally innocent. But if I come up with some irrational ideas, and talk about, or publish, them, I am guilty. My moral crime is in urging others to act upon them.

This is wrong. At best I should be judged guilty in *both* cases. But, if anything, the *first* case is the one in which I should be judged guilty and the second one not. In the first case the consequences of my idea, if carried out, are obvious. It requires no thought to see what those consequences are. In the second case the consequences of my idea are (a) not obvious, they require a lot of thought and (b) the bad consequences ensue only if others accept and act on my ideas.

Peikoff’s purpose in advancing this bizarre argument is to be able to pronounce the verdict “evil” on, for example, someone who subscribes to logical positivism; because logical positivism, being a false doctrine (which it is), must lead to, say, Auschwitz and the Gulag. But even if this were true it would not follow that a logical positivist could automatically *see* those consequences. If he *could* see consequences such as these he might give up his logical positivism. Part of our purpose in debating with others is precisely to expose the inconsistency in their ideas — to point out consequences which the advocates are unaware of and which, if they were aware of, would contradict other beliefs they hold. Peikoff ought to be alive to this. Free marketeers are habitually accused by statists of being in favour of all sorts of things which they are not in favour of — such things being the *presumed* consequences of adopting free market ideas.

TOLERANCE IS *NOT* EVIL

Objectivist hysteria about “tolerance” seems to stem from their fear of inadvertently sanctioning evil. Part of the problem is that Objectivists apply the concept of tolerance in an unclear manner. When we debate with people whose ideas we believe to be false we *tolerate* their company (or a written exchange of views) because we are *intolerant* of their false ideas.¹² That is why we *oppose* them. It is obvious that we are not “sanctioning” their ideas. Rand herself tolerated many persons who, as far as I can tell from the views of Peikoff and Schwartz, should not have been tolerated at all. Nathaniel Branden tolerated the now-libertarian, Walter Block, when Block was a socialist and at a time when Branden was still an associate of Rand. Branden tolerated his sisters, even though at least one of them was a socialist. Rand tolerated at least one Marxist, Albert Mannheimer, according to Barbara Branden.¹³ She vowed to convert him to capitalism within a year. In fact it took less time than this. But notice that Rand was willing to allow a year. This means that she must have been prepared to keep on restating her arguments for this period of time without necessarily having to conclude that Mannheimer was evil and, so, beyond the pale.

When people encounter new ideas which are contrary to what they currently believe, it is unreasonable to expect them to adopt those ideas at the drop of a hat. They need time to check them out and to integrate them with the rest of their knowledge (precisely the procedure that is supposed to be so valued by Objectivists). Large chunks of one’s previous beliefs will still appear to be correct, even though they may contradict a new idea which seems equally plausible. It is necessary to sort through all this so as to re-establish consistency. One needs also to test out the new idea — to check that it does deal successfully with all the problems in its domain. Consequently it is perfectly rational, when hearing a new idea that conflicts with one’s existing beliefs, to search for counterexamples. Thus it is unreasonable to conclude, after a single discussion, or even after several discussions, that an opponent is “irrational” simply because he does not adopt our ideas immediately. Of course, there may come a time when we conclude that further effort is not worthwhile because our time could be more fruitfully employed elsewhere.

As to when we should *not* tolerate the company of intellectual opponents (for the purposes of debate) I think Kelley’s advice seems reasonable. If opponents resort to *ad hominem* tactics or substitute insults for argument etc., then debate is a worthless exercise.¹⁴

IN DEBATE, WHETHER INTELLECTUAL ERROR IS INNOCENT OR NOT DOES NOT MATTER

As to the “errors of morality” versus “errors of knowledge” issue I would say that, in regard to the expression of ideas, even those whom we consider to be morally evil *may* be engaged intellectually provided that they are willing to resort to civilised discussion. That is, provided that they use *reasoning* to support their ideas. “Reasoning” in this context means advancing some sort of verbal, and non-abusive, argument. It does not mean being “rational” by the Objectivist standard of rationality. The purpose of debates of this sort is not necessarily to persuade an opponent away from his views, though that may be possible. It is more usually to unmask, for our audience (who may be duped by our opponent) the errors in, and/or the evil consequences of, our opponent’s ideas.

In this sense, it *does not really matter* whether we consider an opponent to be “evil” or whether we consider him only to be in intellectual error. Either way we *still* use reason to oppose his ideas. The absolute cut-off point for this sort of engagement is the open use of force by our opponent or his active involvement in organisations currently employing force. In other words, paraphrasing Rand, “debate ends where a gun begins”.

As to whether we *should* tolerate the company of intellectual opponents I would say that one is not *obliged* to do anything.

If someone holds an ideology which he applies to his own life, and is not involved in activism or academia, then whether he debates

with opponents or not is not of much consequence. However, if he is involved in activism or academia, and is trying to spread his ideas (as Peikoff and Schwartz are, for example), then he is not likely to get very far if he refuses on principle to debate with his opponents. Obviously most recruits to an ideology will, initially, be opponents of it or, at least, won’t be in total philosophical or political agreement with it. Of course, some kinds of engagement may be perceived to be more fruitful than others. And it is certainly neither necessary nor desirable, nor even possible, to debate with all groups that conform to our criteria for civilised discussion. My main gripe in my previous essay was not, despite its title (which I did not choose), that Objectivists *must* debate with libertarians, but with the view that debate with libertarians is *necessarily* evil.

TRUTH IS THE STANDARD, NOT CONFORMITY TO AN IDEOLOGY

Peikoff argues that Objectivism is a closed system, in that its principles have been laid down once and for all by its author. I am not much bothered about arguing this point (though I think it is probably false) because it is not the fundamental issue. The fundamental issue is *truth*. In tackling the problems of life the important thing is not whether the ideas I acquire are in accordance with, say, the principles of Objectivism, but whether those ideas are true. If, on the basis of reasoning, I conclude that a certain course of action, or a certain idea, is correct then that is what I should uphold. If it turns out to be at variance with a principle of Objectivism then so much the worse for Objectivism.

But there is also the possibility that, due to the open-ended nature of concepts, as explained by Objectivism, I conclude that a principle needs to be expanded rather than rejected. Rand did not claim to have solved all philosophical problems, or at least did not write down the solutions to all philosophical problems. Hence such titles as *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*.

IN REGARD TO IDEAS, MORAL JUDGEMENT IS NOT STRAIGHTFORWARD

How to judge people who appear not to be acting consistently with Objectivism is more complex than Peikoff seems to allow. Let’s agree, for the sake of argument, that the acceptance of the principles laid down by Rand characterises adherence to Objectivism. Then we can make the following observations.

(1) It is necessary to decide which of Ayn Rand’s statements (or writings authorised by her as being Objectivist) are, in fact, *principles* of Objectivism, and which are merely comments regarding concrete facts.

(2) It is necessary to distinguish between the principles themselves and the *application* of those principles to specific problems. Some of Ayn Rand’s comments regarding concrete facts will be her attempts at applying her principles, and some of them will be just off-hand remarks or may be the application of principles brought in from other disciplines, such as economics.

(3) Point (2) is important because the application of principles requires thought and, due to human fallibility, the principles can be *wrongly* applied. Thus it is not a straightforward matter to decide whether someone who is acting in a way an Objectivist disapproves of is doing so from an incorrect application of *correct* principles or from a correct application of *incorrect* principles. If it is the former then that person may be classified as an Objectivist who has made an error of knowledge, unless one can show that he willfully misapplies the principles. If it is the latter then the person is not an Objectivist. But then his rejection of Objectivism might still be due to errors of knowledge.

Such considerations are important. For example, I have yet to encounter an Objectivist, including ones who tend to side with Peikoff in this dispute, who agree with everything Rand wrote. But all of these persons would profess agreement with what they consider to be the essential principles of Objectivism. If the test of being a genuine Objectivist were based on adherence to *everything* Rand

wrote it is quite possible that the only genuine Objectivist would be Rand herself.

In the cases of Peikoff and Kelley, both believe that they are following the principles of Objectivism. Since they reach different conclusions, at least one of them must be wrong. Each one claims to accept the principles of Objectivism. However, each thinks not only that the other misapplies those principles, but that the other rejects one or more principles too.

TO CONCLUDE ...

I am not an Objectivist. I am quite happy to be classified in Peikoff's group of those persons who accept certain ideas of Ayn Rand but not the whole lot. However, as far as I can tell from Kelley's writings, I see no reason not to call him an Objectivist. I would also call Peikoff an Objectivist. To me, their dispute seems to rest primarily on the *interpretation and application* of the principles of Objectivism. Assuming that both are honest, then the fact that each claims acceptance of the principles of Objectivism, in my eyes, makes both Objectivists. The dispute then rests on misinterpretation of the principles and/or their misapplication by either or both of them.

ADDENDUM: A CRITIQUE OF PETER SCHWARTZ'S "ON MORAL SANCTIONS"

Peter Schwartz's essay, "On Moral Sanctions", is an addendum to Leonard Peikoff's "Fact and Value" and was written to expand on the Objectivist principle of "not sanctioning evil". He starts off by citing the example of a government-sponsored book fair in Iran being supported by certain Western publishers, in the wake of the Salman Rushdie affair. I agree with Schwartz's negative evaluation of this so I will not discuss it further.

However, the main focus of his essay is libertarianism. Before launching into his assault he comments on "arbitrary, gratuitous attacks" against Ayn Rand in Barbara Branden's biography, *The Passion of Ayn Rand*.¹³ He calls these attacks "smears" which should not be tolerated. And neither should the people who support such smears be tolerated.

I actually thought that, given the ugliness of the split between Rand and the Brandens, Barbara Branden's biography was remarkably friendly towards Rand. But, given the nature of the split, one would hardly expect Branden to be a hundred percent complimentary.

Schwartz's reaction seems to be typical of someone who shoots first and asks questions later (or perhaps not at all). Rather than discuss the merits of arguments he simply prefers to denounce people as evil. Though, admittedly, it is much more fun to denounce people as evil than to engage in serious discussion.

After explaining why Objectivists should not speak to libertarian groups, Schwartz then adds that they can speak to other non-Objectivist groups (such as conservative or liberal groups), even though those groups hold mistaken views. Such mistaken views, he says, are not necessarily irrational, so dialogue with them is OK.¹⁴

From Objectivism's point of view, conservatism and liberalism subscribe to just the sort of evil ideas (subjectivism, pragmatism, united-front-ism, etc.) that libertarianism is alleged to subscribe to. So what is it that makes conservative and liberal groups "rational" while libertarian groups are to be condemned as irrational? No answer from Schwartz.

Schwartz does admit that there may be a "handful" of libertarians who "may be open to reason".¹⁵ It is OK to speak to them provided it is not done at libertarian venues (such as Laissez-Faire Books), otherwise one is "sanctioning" libertarianism.

I cannot see why the choice of venue is important. What is important is the intellectual content of what one espouses. If a libertarian accepts an invitation to debate with the Revolutionary Communist Party at a venue of their choosing (as Brian Micklethwait did a couple of years ago), in no way can this be considered as "san-

tioning" the Revolutionary Communist Party. (Forming some sort of political alliance with the RCP would be a different matter. That *would* be sanctioning evil.)

This attitude of Peikoff and Schwartz towards libertarianism is even more puzzling when one learns that, not only are debates with conservatives and liberals sanctioned. Debates with socialists are sanctioned; judging by the fact that Second Renaissance Books (the official Objectivist mailing service) sells cassettes of debates between Objectivists and socialists. So the Objectivist/libertarian rift seems analogous to the situation on the collectivist wing of the political spectrum, where the various rival Marxist groups will not debate with each other but will (occasionally) debate with pro-capitalist groups.¹⁶

In conclusion, my critique of Peikoff and Schwartz is not intended to be from a presumed Objectivist perspective. It represents an honest search for the truth. Having said that, I do not regard my critique as being in fundamental conflict with Objectivism. Some Objectivists may think otherwise. However, their primary question should not be: "Are these arguments consistent with Objectivism?" It should be: "Are these arguments true?"

NOTES

1. Kevin McFarlane, *Why Objectivists Should Debate With Other Libertarians: A Discussion of David Kelley's Truth and Tolerance*, Philosophical Notes No. 22, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1992.
2. David Kelley, *Truth and Tolerance*, Institute for Objectivist Studies, Verbank, New York, 1990.
3. "Objectivism" is the name used by Ayn Rand to describe her philosophical system. Its political ideal is laissez-faire capitalism with a limited government for the provision of police, armed forces and the administration of justice.
4. Peter Schwartz, *Libertarianism: The Perversion of Liberty*, The Intellectual Activist, New York, 1986.
5. Peter Schwartz, "On Moral Sanctions" in *The Intellectual Activist*, Volume V, Number 1, New York, 1989.
6. Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, Dutton, New York, 1991.
7. Leonard Peikoff, "Fact and Value" in *The Intellectual Activist*, Volume V, Number 1, New York, 1989.
8. According to Kelley, as of March 1994, to his knowledge, in the three years since the publication of *Truth and Tolerance* there has been no criticism of the arguments put forth in that work. There have, however, been denunciations and name-calling. Those who incline to Kelley's viewpoint have been called "snarling wimps" (*IOS Journal*, Institute for Objectivist Studies, Poughkeepsie, New York, March 1994, pp. 11-12).
9. Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, op. cit., Chapter 5, "The Arbitrary As Neither True Nor False".
10. The Correspondence Theory of Truth is little more than formalised commonsense.
11. Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, op. cit., p. 165.
12. If I wanted to be facetious I could say that those who do not engage in debate with their opponents (when invited) are guilty of tolerating their opponents' false ideas!
13. Barbara Branden, *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, Doubleday, New York, 1986, p. 121.
14. Debating with many Marxists and Christians is fruitless if they resort to what Popper calls "reinforced dogmatism". A Marxist who dismisses criticisms of Marxism as mere "bourgeois apologetics" and a Christian who dismisses criticisms of Christianity as mere "limited human reasoning" are exponents of reinforced dogmatism. I have encountered both Marxists and Christians of this sort. But not all Marxists and Christians are like this (at least not all the time).
15. If anything, in my experience, rather than a "handful" of libertarians being open to reason, many libertarians could be considered to be *too* open to reason. By this I mean that they are often prepared to debate opposing ideologists to the point of diminishing returns.
16. One reason for Schwartz's views, and those of Marxist sects, might be that "heretics are worse than pagans". Conservatives and liberals are generally unfamiliar with Objectivism and so may be, to some extent, engaged philosophically. But libertarians are generally familiar with Objectivism, and yet reject it, and so are to be condemned as evil. However, Mises and Hazlitt were presumably familiar with Objectivism and rejected it. But they are not condemned as evil.