

# REASON PAPERS

A Journal of Interdisciplinary Normative Studies

## *Articles*

- Money Can Buy Happiness -Tara Smith  
The Ambiguity of Kant's Concept of Happiness - Thomas Marshall  
Popper on "Social Engineering": A Classical Liberal View - Tom Avery

## *Discussion Notes*

- Libertarianism vs. Objectivism: A Response to Peter Schwartz  
- Walter Block

## *Review Essay*

- Tara Smith's *Viable Values: A Study of Life as the Root and Reward of Morality*  
- Irfan Khawaja

## *Book Reviews*

- Randy Cohen's *The Good, the Bad & the Difference: How to Tell Right From Wrong in Everyday Situations*  
- Steven Sanders  
Charlotte Twight's *Dependent on D.C.: The Rise of Federal Control Over the Lives of Ordinary Americans*  
- Irfan Khawaja  
Richard Schacht's *Nietzsche's Postmoralism: Essays on Nietzsche's Prelude to Philosophy's Future*  
- Mark T. Conard

Vol. 26

Summer 2003

**Editor:**

Aeon J. Skoble

**Editorial Assistant:**

Justin Elliott

**Editor Emeritus:**

Tibor R. Machan

**Associate Editors:**

Walter Block / *Economics*

Douglas J. Den Uyl / *Philosophy*

Kelley Dean Jolley / *Philosophy*

Leonard Liggio / *History*

Eric Mack / *Philosophy*

John D. McCallie / *Economics*

H. Joachim Maitre / *International Relations*

Ralph Raico / *History*

Lynn Scarlett / *Political Science*

**Advisory Board:**

D. T. Armentano / *University of Hartford*

Yale Brozen / *University of Chicago*

Nicholas Capaldi / *Loyola University New Orleans*

R. L. Cunningham / *University of San Francisco*

John Hospers / *University of Southern California*

Israel M. Kirzner / *New York University*

Kenneth G. Lucey / *SUNY College at Fredonia*

Fred D. Miller, Jr. / *Bowling Green State University*

Herbert Morris / *University of California, Los Angeles*

Clifton Perry / *Auburn University*

Paul Craig Roberts / *Georgetown University*

Morton L. Schagrin / *SUNY College at Fredonia*

Thomas S. Szasz / *SUNY Medical Center, Syracuse*

Reason Papers Vol. 26 was made possible by a generous grant from Freedom Communications, Inc. and by several small private contributions.

# REASON PAPERS

Vol. 26 - Summer 2003

## **Articles**

Money *Can* Buy Happiness - Tara Smith 7

The Ambiguity of Kant's Concept of Happiness - Thomas Marshall  
21

Popper on "Social Engineering": A Classical Liberal View - Tom Avery  
29

## **Discussion Notes**

Libertarianism vs. Objectivism: A Response to Peter Schwartz  
- Walter Block 39

## **Review Essay**

Tara Smith's *Viable Values: A Study of Life as the Root and Reward of  
Morality* - Irfan Khawaja 63

## **Book Reviews**

Randy Cohen's *The Good, the Bad & the Difference: How to Tell Right From  
Wrong in Everyday Situations* - Steven Sanders 89

Charlotte Twight's *Dependent on D.C.: The Rise of Federal Control Over the  
Lives of Ordinary Americans* - Irfan Khawaja 95

Richard Schacht's *Nietzsche's Postmoralism: Essays on Nietzsche's Prelude  
to Philosophy's Future* - Mark T. Conard  
105



## Editorial

*Reason Papers* was founded in 1974 by Professor Tibor R. Machan, who edited the first twenty-five volumes. A review of the tables of contents of those volumes reveals many of today's best philosophers sowing the seeds of work for which they would later become famous, and showcases some great debates in moral and political philosophy. It was an honor for me to be asked by Professor Machan to contribute a review essay back in 1992, sharing journal space with many of the scholars I looked up to and had been using in my own research. After the completion of volume 25, Fall 2000, Professor Machan decided to focus his energies on other projects, and honored me once again by choosing to turn over the editorship of *Reason Papers* to me. I appreciate the confidence in my judgement he has shown by this decision, as well as the innumerable other ways in which he has been of help, guidance, and friendship to me over the years. It has taken me some time to get acquainted with the production end of things, and I regret the delay in getting volume 26 prepared, but henceforth *Reason Papers* resumes regular annual publication. I have also created a web site for the Journal, at <http://webhost.bridgew.edu/askoble/RPad.htm>

which includes the tables of contents from most past volumes, as well as information on ordering and guidelines for submissions. I would like to thank you the reader for your new or continued interest in *Reason Papers*, and hope you will overlook any formatting glitches, none of which are the responsibility of any of this issue's contributors. I hope the Journal continues to flourish.

Aeon J. Skoble  
Bridgewater State College  
Editor



## Money *Can* Buy Happiness

Tara Smith  
University of Texas at Austin

Money is underrated.

That claim may seem ridiculous, in an era of conspicuous consumption. One hardly need belong to the superrich to drive an imposing SUV, dine out frequently at ever better restaurants, shovel grunt work to a housekeeper, pamper oneself with pick-me-ups (facials, massages) once reserved for the upper echelons, or have one's daily routine facilitated by technological conveniences undreamed of a few decades ago. Shopping—and charging—have become national addictions.

At the same time that the appetite for material goods seems insatiable, people are commonly plagued by clouds of guilt. Some part of them views material desires as a vice. Students identifying themselves as business majors characteristically inject a self-deprecating remark to pre-empt others' anticipated criticism of their <sup>1</sup>interest in money. The familiar analysis is that people today are too materialistic, that thirst for "stuff" has crowded out more worthy pursuits. Our obsession with material goods has created imbalances; workaholics complain of inadequate time to enjoy their riches. The very term "consumer society" is usually a derisive rather than a neutral description of modern life<sup>1</sup>. Money—at least at the theoretical level—is persistently attacked from left and right alike. Witness recent protests at World Trade Organization meetings and complaints against pharmaceutical companies, lamenting the power of the rich. Or listen to rightwing social commentators (such as William Bennett, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Hilton Cramer) who warn that "having it too easy" corrupts our virtue, makes us soft, and spoils our children.<sup>2</sup> Across the political spectrum, all agree that the materially successful bear a responsibility to give back to their communities, implying that prosperity means that one has "taken" too much.

---

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Hacker speaks for many when he disparages personal purchases and writes that "being the leader in consumption is not necessarily cause for congratulation." *Money—Who Has How Much and Why* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 19. The Voluntary Simplicity movement of recent years seeks to restore less materialistic priorities, urging people to cut back on both work and possessions. See Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin, *Your Money or Your Life* (New York: Viking, 1992); Sarah Ban Breathnach, *Simple Abundance* (New York: Warner Books, 1995); or, for a brief description of the movement, Robert Frank, *Luxury Fever* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 187 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Dinesh D'Souza, *The Virtue of Prosperity* (New York: The Free Press, 2000) 39-48. D'Souza also tells of a friend who maintains that the country was "saved" by the Great Depression. Reason Papers 26 (Summer 2000): 7-20. Copyright © 2000

Religion has long warned against the lure of material goods. Christian Scripture is explicit in several places. “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.” To merit eternal life, Jesus instructs us to sell all our possessions and give the money to the poor. Timothy writes that the desire for riches plunges men into “ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil.”<sup>3</sup>

Church fathers since have remained, at best, suspicious of money, often condemning usury and “luxurious living,” warning against money as a distraction from God and a temptation to sin.<sup>4</sup> In recent years, economists have added to this spiritual assault the weight of social science data, concluding from studies of people’s income and life-satisfaction levels that the truism “money can’t buy happiness” really is true.<sup>5</sup>

I beg to differ. In an important sense, money can buy happiness.

Money can be misspent, to be sure. The relationship between money and happiness is not one of simple, seamless cause and effect. Conventional wisdom woefully minimizes the value of money, however. And in doing so, it sabotages people’s capacity to be happy.

For this reason, my aim in this paper is to clarify the relationship between money and happiness. To do that, I shall first sketch the basic nature of money and the basic nature of happiness. I will then explain the manner in which money contributes to happiness, adding some clarifications before concluding.

## 1. Money

Money is a token of exchange that facilitates trade. The use of money marks a monumental improvement over barter because of money’s flexibility. This is elementary economics, but it will be useful to refresh ourselves, so as to isolate money’s value.

Since a monetary currency can be traded for all manner of goods and services, its employment liberates an individual from trading exclusively with those who not only offer the things that he would like, but who are simultaneously seeking the very products that he has to offer. (Under a barter system, for instance, the baker must need a haircut in order to have incentive to sell bread to the barber). The convertibility of money into an array of goods and services astronomically expands the value of an individual’s products. By extending the range of other people with whom a person can advantageously

---

<sup>3</sup> Mark 10: 23-27; Mark 10: 17-22; 1 Timothy 6: 8-11, *New American Standard Bible* (Carol Stream, Ill: Creation House, 1973). Among other relevant passages, see Luke 6: 21-25, and Luke 12: 16-35.

<sup>4</sup> For a good account of Christianity’s historical attitudes toward money, see Jacob Viner, *Religious Thought and Economic Society* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> Such studies are reported in Frank, 6, 65; Robert E. Lane, “Does Money Buy Happiness?” *The Public Interest* (no. 113, Fall 1993): 56-65; David Leonhardt, “If Richer Isn’t Happier, What Is?” *New York Times* May 15, 2001, national edition: A15 & 17.



trade, money multiplies his options; it multiplies the purposes to which his wealth can be put. As Georg Simmel observed, “the value of a given quantity of money exceeds the value of the particular object for which it is exchanged, because it makes possible the choice of any other object in an unlimited area... the choice that it offers is a bonus which increases its value.”<sup>6</sup> In short, thanks to the adoption of a common currency, a person’s own productive output acquires a greatly enhanced power to bring him satisfaction.

Money in a person’s wallet signifies his ability to acquire goods that he wants (from others who are willing to trade them). The most basic reason that people seek money, correspondingly, is their wish to be able to satisfy their desires.

Where does money come from? What is the source of a person’s wealth? At the most fundamental level, money arises from the production of goods and services, from the creation of something valuable. More strictly: from the creation of something that other people deem sufficiently valuable to trade for. If a person produces something that is not in demand by others, he will not be able to acquire money for it. His product may still be of value to him; it might serve some definite, constructive purpose in his life and in this way constitute a part of his wealth. Yet if others do not desire it, he will not be able to exchange it for money. A person’s output will be of greater monetary value the greater the number of people who desire it and the more keenly that other people desire it.

Obviously, a given individual might acquire money by means of theft or gift. Yet at root, even this money stems from someone’s creation of goods. Coins and bills stand for the actual objects (including services, specific processes, programs, techniques, formulas, compositions and the like) that people have brought into being.<sup>7</sup>

(Note that we use the terms “money” and “wealth” sometimes to refer to holdings of a currency (e.g., dollars) and sometimes to refer to the actual products (e.g., house, car, jewelry, capital equipment) that a currency can be traded for. I shall use “wealth” in this broader sense, and “financial” or “monetary” wealth to designate wealth in the form of currency.)

## 2. Happiness

Happiness is the psychological condition that results from the achievement of one’s values. Values are ends that a person acts to gain and/or keep.<sup>8</sup> They are those things that a person cares about having or doing—“cares” in the robust sense that he is willing to act to secure them. Values can be material or spiritual. Food, clothes, eyeglasses, a car or a CD player would be material values. “Spiritual” values are those that pertain to a person’s

---

<sup>6</sup> Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* ed. David Frisby, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (London: Routledge, 1990) 212.

<sup>7</sup> I am leaving aside the distortions introduced by a fiat currency.

<sup>8</sup> Both characterizations are from Ayn Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet, 1964) 31, 16.

consciousness (and thus entail nothing mystical or supernatural). Spiritual values encompass such things as knowledge, beauty, a stimulating book, a challenging chess match, rewarding work, mental health, self-esteem, character traits (e.g., honesty, optimism, initiative), a friend or a husband. While spiritual values may take material form (a friend has a body; a book has pages), their value depends primarily on their relation to the needs of a person's consciousness.

Happiness is essentially the satisfaction that arises when a value has been realized. A person might be happy to purchase a week's groceries, save time on his commute home, or get his new computer set up and ready to run. Typically, the more precious the value or the more difficult to attain, the greater the correlative satisfaction. Thus we expect a person to be significantly happier when he has completed a college degree, won a coveted promotion, or married the love of his life. But whatever the value and whatever the intensity of gratification, the principle is the same: achieving values is what makes us happy.

It is useful to distinguish particular incidents of happiness from a more pervasive condition. While happiness results from the achievement of specific goals, when a person seeks happiness itself, he is after a more global kind of satisfaction with his life—with his daily activities, as he is engaged in them, as well as with what they all add up to, when he steps back to survey the totality. This more encompassing happiness requires knowledge that his time and energy are being spent in worthwhile ways and that he is efficacious in acting for the things that he cares about.

Correspondingly, happiness as the overarching goal for one's life refers not merely to an assortment of occasions of feeling satisfied. Rather, global happiness denotes a person's ongoing awareness that he has realized values and will continue to realize values, that value-achievement is a regular feature of his days. This is not to deny that the happy person may struggle, fail, or feel frustration. It is not to suggest that happiness demands a 100% success rate or that the happy person will, in every moment, experience the heady heights of ecstasy. It is to say, however, that happiness refers to more than feeling good about things five or six times a week. This broader, deeper life-happiness consists not simply in isolated episodes of success (even a good number of episodes), but in a more grounded sense of efficacy and success that permeates a person's entire sense of living. The happy person comes to see his life *as* value-achievement; the experience of satisfaction becomes characteristic.

This sort of success requires rational values and rational action in pursuit of them. To attain happiness, a person must clearly identify ends that are mutually compatible and that genuinely advance his well-being, and he must act thoughtfully and logically to realize these ends. While serendipity may occasionally turn up sought-for goods, neither happenstance nor randomly "doing something" can sustain value-achievement, long-term.

It is also important not to equate happiness with the pleasure that results from the satisfaction of *any* desire. The objects of a person's desires are not uniformly good for him (as most of us know from experience). The strong desire for a certain narcotic does not mean that having it would be, all things considered, beneficial. The same applies to all desires.

Consequently, I shall use "values" to refer to ends whose attainment would in fact enhance a person's life. Obviously, the determination of what is good for a person can be an intricate enterprise, as it must take into account all the peculiarities of an individual's context—his unique abilities, needs, resources, knowledge, etc. For our purposes, I simply wish to stress that understanding happiness as a function of value achievement does not entail hedonism. Elsewhere, I have argued at length that it is the quest for life that gives rise to the very phenomenon of values.<sup>9</sup> Only against the background of that overarching objective can we legitimately distinguish some things as good for a person (valuable) and others as bad. Life, correspondingly, provides the objective yardstick by which we can identify bona fide values (ends that do constructively contribute to a person's well-being).<sup>10</sup>

One further feature of happiness is significant for our larger concern. Happiness must be self-generated. Both a person's ends and his means of attaining his ends must be selected by his independent judgment and pursued through his own actions.

Aristotle was right to observe that certain external goods are necessary for eudaimonia.<sup>11</sup> A person cannot flourish in the absence of minimal material goods. Yet the heart of happiness resides in how a person leads his life rather than in what he possesses.

Correspondingly, happiness is not the sort of thing that can be transferred from one person to another. It cannot be borrowed, stolen, shared or forced. Well-wishers can lend all sorts of material and moral support, and these can help a person in substantial ways. Money, time off, or an understanding listener can strengthen a person's ability to accomplish a difficult goal. In the end, however, one person, however loving and generous, cannot make another person happy. He cannot *achieve* on behalf of another, and he consequently cannot supply the type of satisfaction that happiness consists in. The way to achieve values is through a person's own exertion of

---

<sup>9</sup> See my *Viable Values—A Study of Life as the Root and Reward of Morality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), especially chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>10</sup> The objectivity of values permits considerable variety in the specific things that a person might legitimately pursue as values in his life. Scores of careers are legitimate values, as are scores of hobbies and recreational pursuits, tastes in fashion, furniture, film, food, music and men. The point is not to restrict human pursuits to a narrow band of robotic conformity. The point is that values must be genuinely constructive to a person's overall and long-term well-being. For further discussion of discretion in selection of values, see *Viable Values*, pp 97-103. And for a deeper exploration of the nature of happiness, see chapter 5.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, chapter 8, 1099b.

will. Thus the ability to exercise one's will—autonomy—is a prerequisite of happiness.

(A sense of efficacy seems to be part of what fuels happiness. When a person does achieve a value, it is not exclusively attainment of the particular end that makes him feel good. It is also the knowledge that he was able to attain it. That is, his specific achievement sends a wider message to his subconscious: "I am the kind of person who is able to achieve my ends; I am competent to succeed in the world." This sense of efficacy can only arise from the person's having selected his ends and means for himself, however.)

### **3. How Money "Buys" Happiness**

So where does money shine in? How does money contribute to happiness?

In two principal ways. Both directly and indirectly, money facilitates a person's achievement of values.

#### ***A. Material Beings Have Material Needs***

Human beings are not brains in vats. We are physical as well as spiritual beings, bodies as well as consciousnesses. As such, we have material needs. Money is instrumental in meeting these needs. It provides the ability to trade for the requisite goods.

This does not underestimate the spiritual dimension of life. For many people, it is precisely certain spiritual values that make life worth living.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, what keeps us going, at the most biologically fundamental level, is the fulfillment of physical needs. Certain material basics are indispensable. It is ludicrous to minimize this fact or to proceed as if it somehow shouldn't be the case. Even the missionary or the ascetic requires a place to rest his body, food to nourish him, medicine to heal his illnesses.

The tenet that money can't buy happiness often manifests a broader hostility toward human beings' physical nature. To a considerable extent, disdain for money reflects Platonic snobbery against the sensory "realm of particulars." It is the legacy of a mind-body dichotomy that pits the mind as morally superior and our material nature as base.

In fact, however, the spiritual is empty apart from the material. A person cannot experience or enjoy anything as a disembodied being. He must satisfy his material needs. Money is his means of doing that. It is his claim to the goods and services required for the maintenance of his life. It is wealth—whether in the form of the currency that a person possesses or in the goods that he produces and can convert into currency—that enables a person to acquire the things without which he could not survive.

The misuse of material goods is, regrettably, widespread. People often exaggerate the power of wealth. They expect more of material goods than they can deliver, investing emotionally in wealth *per se* rather than in the ends that make wealth meaningful. These misconceptions foster the

---

<sup>12</sup> I highlight this in *Viable Values*, pp. 136-143.

assumption that the problem rests in money itself. Yet the misuse is just that—an error on our part. Material goods are vital to happiness.

My contention is not that money or material goods are inherently valuable. They are not valuable regardless of the reasons for which they are sought, the means by which they are sought, or the uses to which they are put. Nothing is good independently of an individual's context.<sup>13</sup> Material objects become good only when they offer a positive contribution to a person's survival and flourishing. Material stuff remains morally neutral until it carries some palpable impact on a person's well-being.

Money can, however, be a passkey to all manner of values—mundane or modest, rare or extravagant, offering immediate gratification or longer-lasting fulfillment. Money can buy hamburger or caviar, wool or sable, busfare or a cruise, a wheelchair or a new nose, electric service or a hyper-fast wireless Web access. Money can help a person to obtain any of the ever-expanding range of goods and services that others have created and offer for sale. Its potential in this regard is limited only by individuals' productive ingenuity.

### **B. Money Is Time**

We all understand the saying that “time is money.” While people dawdle, the opportunity to earn money—to make something valuable of their time—is lost. What is equally true, although far less appreciated, is that the reverse is true: money is time. And this observation provides still greater illumination of money's contribution to happiness.

This point is well made by a character in Ayn Rand's novel *Atlas Shrugged*. Ellis Wyatt explains to a visitor the benefits of his oil drilling operation's advanced production methods:

“What's wealth but the means of expanding one's life? There's two ways one can do it: either by producing more or by producing it faster. And that's what I'm doing: manufacturing time... I'm producing everything I need, I'm working to improve my methods, and every hour I save is an hour added to my life. It used to take me five hours to fill that tank. It now takes three. The two I saved are mine—as pricelessly mine as if I moved my grave two further hours away for every five I've got. It's two hours released from one task, to be invested in another—two more hours in which to work, to grow, to move forward. That's the saving account I'm hoarding...”<sup>14</sup>

The core idea is elegantly simple. Why do we labor to make money in the first place? To sustain ourselves. Each of us requires a certain amount of

---

<sup>13</sup> I have argued against anything's having intrinsic value in “Intrinsic Value: Look-Say Ethics,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (December 1998), pp. 539-553 as well as in *Viable Values*, chapter 3.

<sup>14</sup> Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Dutton, 1957) 721-722.

stuff to live. Even minimal subsistence demands fuel. We are thus obliged to produce the things that we need in order to survive.

The easier it is to produce those things, the less effort and energy required, the better. For that frees time to devote to more enjoyable activities. The more that a person has produced (which is what his wealth signifies), the less he needs to produce in the future. And the greater his ability to make his productive work work that he finds rewarding.

Without money, a person must concentrate on those tasks that he must perform in order to make it through another day; bare necessities preoccupy him. With money, a person can contemplate what he would *like* to do and indulge more of his preferences. Money allows a person to customize his days more to his taste (e.g., by grabbing breakfast at McDonald's rather than making coffee at home, by buying a car rather than relying on buses, by working as a gardener rather than a programmer).

In short, money empowers autonomy. Greater independence from the demands of necessity means greater discretion over one's activities, enabling a person to exert more control over the shape of his days. Autonomy, we saw earlier, is the scaffolding for happiness.

Consider a slight variation on Wyatt's scenario. Suppose that Ron needs to work eight hours a day to make enough money to keep him and his family going (housed, fed, clothed, entertained, etc.) at level x. Now suppose that, due to greater demand or more efficient production on his part, he needs to work only six hours a day to sustain that standard of living.

What happens to those extra two hours? It's up to Ron, of course, how he uses them. But that's the point. And that is the value of wealth. Those hours now become available for Ron to spend however he likes. He does not need to work during that time in order to maintain his existing standard of living, although he can seek a higher standard of living and work in those hours to attain that aim. But he can also use the time for different types of rewards: he can go to the park, go to the movies, be with his wife, play with his kids, play the piano, write, read, run, paint. He can prepare himself to pursue a different line of work that he finds more enjoyable (obtaining the appropriate education or training, sending out resumes). He can do whatever he finds most conducive to his overall happiness.<sup>15</sup>

Some of the time that Ron previously had to "pay" for life (laboring to secure a certain standard of living) is now liberated. In that way, just as Wyatt described, more money means more time. And more time to devote to one's well-being—or to elevating one's well-being in substantive ways—directly allows more happiness.

---

<sup>15</sup> To speak of a person's pursuing such values *rather* than seeking a higher standard of living is somewhat misleading, but accords with the conventional usage, which measures standard of living exclusively in monetary terms reflected in such things as income or housing costs. In fact, of course, in pursuing these other activities, Ron is elevating his quality of life and thereby raising his actual standard of living.

The economist Robert Frank, hardly an unqualified enthusiast of money, essentially acknowledges as much when he writes:

“...becoming more productive is a good thing, if only because it gives us more options. It enables us to earn more and buy more if we choose to, but it also enables us to earn the same amount by working fewer hours, or to spend more on environmental cleanup. Other things being equal, the more productive a society is, the greater is each citizen’s ability to pursue his vision of the good life.”<sup>16</sup>

Money’s power to expand a person’s options is the heart of its contribution to happiness. A given individual might value spending his life as a novelist, but be unable to sustain an acceptable standard of living through writing. More money—and the time it buys him—makes that pursuit a greater possibility. An academic might value greater concentration on research and less on teaching; more money makes that a greater possibility. A person might value being engaged with his children while they are young, or peace of mind about his retirement; more money makes these greater possibilities.

One of the things these examples make plain is that money is important not only to fulfill physical desires or to acquire material goods. It is also critical for the achievement of many spiritual values. Earlier, I stressed human beings’ material needs so as to affirm the legitimacy of the material values that money helps a person to obtain. Moralists commonly give these short shrift. Yet money’s value does not rest exclusively in its service to material goods. Money facilitates the achievement of *all* values, spiritual as well as material.

It is also important to recognize that the value of labor does not consist entirely in labor’s ultimate products. My emphasis on the goods that money makes available to a person (spiritual as well as material) should not lead us to suppose that work is a painful, regrettable duty and the payoff is reserved until after the work is finished. Some of the spiritual values that money facilitates should help us to appreciate this. Production is valuable not only for the sake of eventual consumption; work itself can be one of the things that a person finds most deeply rewarding.

Much value can be reaped in the *process* of creating wealth, in the activities of making goods and services: conceiving of a new product or convenience or qualitative enhancement that consumers will welcome; devising a more efficient manufacturing method or delivery system; designing and engineering buildings and bridges; treating illnesses; conducting chemical research; teaching history; directing a play; giving a recital; raising capital; writing a book. Productive work itself can be profoundly gratifying. Witness many wealthy people who continue working long after they’ve attained

---

<sup>16</sup> Frank, 97.

sufficient wealth to accommodate their needs quite luxuriously. Or consider the 77-year-old professor who keeps postponing retirement, despite the fact that he could retire quite comfortably. It is the fulfillment from the activity, not just the snappy things that money buys, that keeps Warren Buffett, Michael Dell and countless others hard at work, doing what they love. People do not work simply so that they can enjoy happiness *later*.

Understanding, then, that both the production of money and the consumption of money can enhance a person's happiness, my basic point remains. Money buys the material goods that are prerequisite for life and happiness and money buys the time to pursue whatever spiritual ends a person finds most essential to his happiness. Money enhances a person's ability to achieve his values. The achievement of values is the path to happiness.

#### 4. Clarifications

Please observe my exact claim: money *can* buy happiness. I have not contended that it does—always, necessarily, in every case. Happiness is not readymade, available on the rack as long as one offers the advertised price. Money can equally buy rubbish, addictions, shallow people, misery. I am not proposing money as a psychological panacea: “Anyone struggling with depression: forget therapy, forget Prozac, just get money.” More goes into happiness than material possessions.

As noted earlier, money is not intrinsically good. Correspondingly, it is not unconditionally good. The wealth that an individual acquires is a tool. To enhance his happiness, he must use the tool wisely.

Rand, elsewhere, offered a helpful distinction between money makers and money appropriators. The money appropriator, she explained, does not create anything of value, but obtains his money by manipulating other people. Such a person might become rich without literally *making* any money, without adding to the world's stock of valuable goods and services. The money maker, by contrast, creates genuine value; he brings into being new and worthwhile products. The important point for us is that it is only the wealth of the money maker that can truly contribute to a person's happiness. It can do so precisely because the money maker “does not care for money *as such*.” For him, money is a means to an end: a means of “expanding the range of his activity,” strengthening his ability to chart the course of his life.<sup>17</sup>

The larger lesson is that while money can buy happiness, money does not guarantee happiness, since a person might mispend his money or his time. Money does not furnish a person with a worthwhile direction in which to steer his activities, nor with the virtues necessary to steer effectively. Money *can* buy happiness, however, when a person's goals are rational and when his means of pursuing them are rational. (Money cannot insulate a person from

---

<sup>17</sup> “The Money Making Personality,” *Why Businessmen Need Philosophy*, ed. Richard E. Ralston (Marina Del Rey, CA: Ayn Rand Institute Press, 1999) 29, 36, emphasis mine. For discussion of money as a tool whose value depends on the character of its owner, see *Atlas Shrugged*, 410, 412.



misfortune, of course, but it can make many misfortunes less likely and many others, more easily withstood.)

Can poor people be happy? Yes. And rich people can be unhappy. We all know this from personal observation. Neither fact jeopardizes my thesis, however.

Economists' reports that a rise in income does not always precipitate a rise in life-satisfaction only testify to the fact that money is not a sufficient condition for happiness.<sup>18</sup> That wealthy people can suffer from "affluenza" underscores the fact that money is not an adequate philosophy of life. As Aristotle observed, wealth is not the highest good, since it is sought for the sake of something else.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, we should not expect it to function in people's lives as if it were the highest good.

A bit more unsettling, at least initially, is the fact that poor people can be happy. For this suggests that money is not even necessary for happiness. More precisely, however, it indicates that large quantities of money are not necessary. And that is true.

My claim has not been that happiness demands that everyone own the same amount of money or that cash occupy an identical position in everyone's hierarchy of values. I have not urged people to pursue the greatest number of dollars possible. Because money is a means, such a view would distort money's role, converting it into an end. Individuals often choose, quite rationally, to forego a higher income so as to enjoy other things they prize more.

Nonetheless, the poorer a person is, the more precarious his life and happiness. Lower depths of poverty mean greater vulnerability, greater likelihood of being pulled away from preferred pursuits to tame threats to minimal well-being. A poor person might have to take a second job to pay for a needed medical procedure, for example. The less wealth one has to draw on, the larger an ongoing concern fulfilling life's basic requirements (such as paying the rent) must be—which leaves less time and tranquility for more agreeable activities. A modicum of money is necessary for happiness simply because, like it or not, human beings have physical needs. If we do not satisfy those needs, we perish. The reality is: even poor people can only be so poor; beneath a certain threshold, we will not survive.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> See note # 5.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, Book I, chapter 5, 1096a5. Aristotle's method in evaluating candidates for highest good was subjective, based on the ways that most people treated these things, but his conclusion about money happened to be correct.

<sup>20</sup> Note that some of the touted economic studies are based on money's impact on people's sense of well-being "once a threshold level of affluence is reached." Frank, 65.

One might object that my thesis has been diluted since we started. If all I want to say is that money *can* buy happiness, with heavy emphasis on the qualifications, isn't that a pretty unremarkable claim?

I think not. For I am contesting what passes for a truism. I needn't embrace the false thesis that money assures happiness in order to be saying something significant. Money, intelligently pursued and intelligently spent, can buy happiness in the ways I have shown. Money buys goods and money buys time. Money buys the autonomy to mold one's life in the image of one's ideal. Money nourishes happiness by helping a person to achieve the values that happiness is made of. Like many things, money can be put to poor uses. Yet money can also be put to wonderful uses, including the greatest: experiencing joy in living. That fact has got to be forthrightly acknowledged if people are to embrace money unapologetically, as they must if they are to attain sufficient control over their lives to realize their ends and fulfill their dreams.

### **Conclusion**

The truth in the cliché that “money can't buy happiness” is that happiness isn't easy. Money does not offer a shortcut around this fact. It is important to appreciate the danger of the drumbeat that “money can't buy happiness,” however.

On one level, it is simply—but disastrously—bad advice, counterproductive to individuals' actually attaining happiness. If money can contribute to happiness, as I have argued—if it is necessary for certain of happiness's minimal ingredients and preconditions—then to insist that it cannot is to close off the route to happiness. It blocks the path that could, if properly followed, allow individuals to achieve their values. To counsel people away from money cripples their ability to be happy.

On a deeper level, to discourage the pursuit of money, *knowing* what money makes possible—the fulfillment of individuals' desires for a better life—would be to discourage the very quest for happiness. That is worse than bad advice.

Some might worry about encouraging more money-chasing in an already overly-materialistic society. “Aren't our children spoiled enough?” Yet my aim is hardly money “chasing,” mindless acquisition for its own sake. While there's plenty to lament in contemporary society's prevalent priorities, money is not the fundamental problem. In our eagerness to teach that money is not the most important thing in life, we have swung too far in the opposite direction, denigrating money as if it were worthless. While money and material goods are not inherently good, it is equally mistaken to dismiss them as inherently bad.

Considering the role of money in happiness forces us to confront the nature of happiness itself, a huge subject to which we could hardly do justice in a brief essay. In its essence, however, happiness is a function of success. It results from achieving values. We have seen that money facilitates value-achievement in crucial respects. Making money (in the literal sense of creating

wealth) is the very process of achieving values. Spending money is a means of acquiring other goods and services that are one's values or that will enhance one's ability to realize one's values. Whether by directly trading for goods or by buying time to devote to those ends that a person finds most worthwhile, money fortifies a person's ability to get what he wants and to do what he wants. As such, it is to be celebrated, cheered—and pursued.

This paper is intended to liberate us from the tyranny of kneejerk condemnations of money—from the reticence that people often feel about pursuing wealth and from the guilt that frequently accompanies their doing so. Why extend such a blessing on money? Because money most definitely can contribute to happiness. And because happiness is the most important thing in life.



## The Ambiguity of Kant's Concept of Happiness

Thomas Marshall  
Neumann College

My analysis of Kant's concept of happiness is motivated by a concern with the role it plays in his ethical system. Typically in ethics, happiness can be viewed as either subjective or objective. The former claims that happiness is a feeling of some sort or other; and it may or may not play a role in ethics. For the latter, happiness is not equated with feelings or the fulfillment of inclinations. In addition, it is taken as the reason or incentive to live a moral life. There are to be two issues that arise when examining Kant's concept of happiness. First, because he generally takes happiness to be subjective, he found it almost impossible to find a place for happiness in his ethical system. Second, because he tried to accommodate the need for happiness in ethics, his use of the concept ends up being ambiguous. This second point indicates that while he primarily understood happiness as subjective, he also used the term in ways that did not coincide with a subjective account. Kant's struggle with the concept indicates that he recognized a viable ethical system must analyze the concept, if for no other reason that its motivational value.

In order to understand Kant's use of the concept of happiness, we must begin with his concept of the summum bonum, which was *happiness in proportion to virtue*.<sup>1</sup> The highest good, then, would appear to be a synthesis of virtue and happiness.<sup>2</sup> However, as we shall see, a synthesis is not what Kant had in mind. Given this initial formulation, one assumes that the highest good necessarily connects the attainment of happiness to living a virtuous life. However, Kant thought that, "striving for happiness provides a ground for a virtuous disposition is absolutely false." However, he continues that, "a virtuous disposition necessarily produces happiness is not absolutely

---

<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. L.W. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1983), p. 115.

<sup>2</sup> Other words besides *synthesis* have been used to describe this relation. H. Jones in *Kant's Principle of Personality* calls it a union of the two (p. 104). L.W. Beck in *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason* and H.J. Paton in *The Categorical Imperative* both use the term bonum consummatum (complete good) to describe the relationship. Beck and Paton take the summum bonum to be some kind of additive concept where virtue and happiness equal the summum bonum. Whatever word is used, the point is clear: there is supposed to be some special relation between the two concepts that yields the concept of the highest good. I am inclined to think that Kant himself did not really understand this relation clearly. Hence, we are not sure how to characterize it. I think if he clearly understood this relationship, he would have considered it a synthesis because virtue and happiness form an entirely new, and systemically more important, concept of the summum bonum.

Reason Papers 26 (Summer 2000): 21-28. Copyright © 2000

false."<sup>3</sup> By this he means that it is false in the sense of "causality in the world of sense," but it is not absolutely false because there is another mode of existence for a rational being than the world of sense. Kant was thinking of some other level of existence where the human will is subject to the moral law as a pure intellectual determining ground. So, Kant concludes that, "the highest good is the necessary highest end of a morally determined will and a true object thereof."<sup>4</sup> The highest good, then, is the goal of all rational beings.

There is a critical flaw in Kant's conception of the highest good. The problem is that moral good is not necessarily, nor in any important way, connected to happiness. Of course, one could claim that moral good is a necessary condition for happiness because without it one would feel self-contempt, and, consequently, not be happy. However, this is only a negative condition, and does not imply that if one does not feel self-contempt, one will be happy. This lacks the force needed for a positive conception of happiness.

Kant claimed that the attainment of the highest good is the "moral wish" of every rational creature. One may drop a coin (virtuous conduct) into the moral wishing well, but there is no guarantee, or even likelihood, of the wish coming true. Happiness, in this conception of the summum bonum, is much too passive because it provides no incentive to act morally. Part of the role that happiness plays in most ethical systems is to provide some motivation for moral action. There may be a level of attractiveness to Kant's theory that does not qualify as happiness; however, this is unlikely because the attractiveness of an object and the happiness it will engender cannot be separated.

### Subjective Concept

Kant's primary concept of happiness is crudely subjective. For example, he stated, "in this Idea of happiness all inclinations are combined into a total sum."<sup>5</sup> On this account, happiness is nothing more than the satisfaction of the sum total of one's inclinations. The more inclinations satisfied, the happier a person is. Since, desire is a subjective state, it follows that happiness, which is nothing but the fulfillment of desires, is also a subjective state. Kant's certainty about this matter is exemplified in the claim that, "men cannot form under the name of happiness any determinate and assured conception of the satisfaction of all inclinations as a sum."<sup>6</sup> It follows that if happiness is a function of a person's desires, there cannot be a determinate concept because there are as many different and conflicting desires as there are persons.

---

3. Kant, op. cit., p. 119.

4. Ibid.

5. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. By H.J. Paton (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), p. 67. See also *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 129.

6. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, p. 67.

This understanding of happiness was a continual theme throughout Kant's work. For example, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* we find, "happiness is the satisfaction of all our desires, extensively, in respect of their manifoldness, intensively, in respect of their degree, and protensively, in respect of their duration." (806a-834b). In the *Doctrine of Virtue* we find, "only our natural impulses to food, sex, rest, and activity, along with the natural impulses to honor ... can tell us in what we have to posit that satisfaction."<sup>7</sup> Here, again, we see that he takes happiness to be nothing more than the satisfaction of one's sum total of desires. Beck explains this tendency by saying that, "a state of happiness is one in which there is continuous satisfaction of all desires."<sup>8</sup>

Because of his subjective understanding of happiness, Kant thought that happiness could play no role in being a foundation for an ethical system. As a subjective concept, happiness is indefinable in general, as well as in most particular cases. Hence, it can never be the foundation for an ethical system because it cannot be clearly defined. Given his subjective understanding of happiness, Kant had a difficult time finding a place for happiness in his system. In most teleological ethics, happiness plays an important role because it is the incentive, or ultimate end, for that system. Happiness cannot play this role in Kant's system. That he was aware of this problem is evident. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* he asks the question "what may I hope?" His answer is enlightening: "all hoping is directed towards happiness" (806a-834b). He knew that all people look to happiness as their final end, their supreme good; yet, because of his subjective account he did not see how it could play such a role. As a result, he grappled with the problem of happiness and ethics in a variety of ways. His ambivalent relationship with the concept of happiness led him to describe happiness in a variety of ways that were seldom consistent with his subjective account.

### **Ambiguity**

The second, and more internally problematic, issue arises out of Kant's realization that people have to be motivated to act ethically. His attempt to deal with this reality leads to the ambiguity of his concept of happiness. Although, as noted above, he maintained a crudely subjective account of happiness, it is possible to find other accounts as well. Others have identified at least two versions of happiness in Kant's work. This leads to two problems. The first is that such ambiguity makes it difficult to determine whether Kant had a consistent concept, and, second, we cannot be sure how he wanted to use happiness in his system.

---

7. Immanuel Kant, *The Doctrine of Virtue*, trans. By M.J. Gregor (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), pp. 12-13.

8. Lewis W. Beck, *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 72.

H.J. Paton mentions the likelihood that there are at least two concepts of happiness found in Kant.<sup>9</sup> The first is the subjective account mentioned above. On this account happiness is primarily hedonistic in nature, and is thought to be nothing more than the greatest possible amount of uninterrupted pleasure throughout one's life. The second account is akin to what is often called the constitutive account of happiness. In this account, Kant takes happiness to be the realization of various ends in an organized and systematic life. Onora Nell makes the same point: "happiness is not a separate end, but the form of all ends an agent may desire."<sup>10</sup> If happiness is not a separate end, and if it is the form of all ends, then it must be necessarily connected to virtue. If happiness is the form of all ends, then it must include the end of developing the good will because being virtuous for duty's sake is one of a person's ends. It will, therefore, be a part of the form of all one's ends. If so, then being virtuous will be a constitutive element of happiness. Of course, Kant argued that the purpose or end of reason is to develop the good will, and not for use in seeking happiness. This too, is changed because now reason has its role in attaining happiness through doing one's duty for duty's sake. This account sounds Aristotelian where what were thought means to happiness, are really elements of happiness. In the Kantian system, this is an attempt to link virtue and happiness in an important and necessary way.

However, the above account does not exhaust the ambiguity of Kant's account of happiness. There are at least two other concepts lurking in his work. The first I wish to examine is found in what Kant called "worthiness to be happy." This concept is found in his formulation of the summum bonum. He claimed that, "virtue and happiness together constitute the possession of the highest good for one person, and happiness in exact proportion to morality."<sup>11</sup> This appears to be the constitutive account of happiness mentioned above; however, it is really quite different. If this formulation of the greatest good were entirely constitutive, then happiness would be inextricably bound up in its constitution. Kant's formulation makes it only one *part* of the greatest good, and a secondary one at that, as we shall see. What detracts from the constitutive nature of this formulation, and causes us to find a third concept of happiness, is that importance of this concept is dependent upon two other conditions. First, Kant claimed that happiness, "is not of itself absolutely good in every respect but always presupposes conduct in accordance with the moral law as its condition."<sup>12</sup> Second, he claimed that, "the highest good is practically possible only on the supposition of the immortality of the soul."<sup>13</sup>

---

9. H.J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperative* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1967, 6<sup>th</sup> ed.), p. 85.

10. Onora Nell, *Acting on Principle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 101.

11. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 115.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, p. 127.



So, Kant's concept of the greatest good is further conditioned by God. These conditions lead to two entirely different concepts of happiness, and make it difficult to find a coherent understanding of happiness. This leaves us with two questions. First, what is more important, worthiness or happiness? Second, what kind of happiness could God give us?

If we consider "worthiness to be happy" as Kant understood the phrase, one is inclined to think that *worthiness* is more important in the formulation than *happiness*. This is apparent when we recall that happiness is to be apportioned according to worthiness; and, more importantly, worthiness is determined by one's adherence to the moral law determined by a good will. Kant certainly made this clear when he said, "a good will seems to constitute the indispensable condition of our very worthiness to be happy."<sup>14</sup> Concerning this issue, Beck said that, "the moral value lies in the worthiness, not in the enjoyment."<sup>15</sup> If this is the case, we must ask what is the point of adding happiness to this formulation? None, it seems, since the entire focus is on worthiness. Recall that "virtue and happiness together" constitute the greatest good. On this account, however, it appears that worthiness alone will suffice. If Kant really meant "virtue and happiness together," then happiness would be a constitutive element of the greatest good. By focusing on worthiness, Kant makes happiness a reward, and not a constitutive element. The very meaning of *worthiness* makes this inevitable. It is a concept that involves reward or payment of some kind, and involves being deserving of something. Obviously, worthiness is the primary focus on Kant's formulation, and there is no real reason to mention happiness as anything more than a reward for a job well done. This means that the greatest good is based on worthiness alone, and the payment is happiness. Of course, Kant cannot accept this option since it would devalue the concept of a good will because it might be motivated for the reward and not by the moral law alone. Hence, the only possible explanation consistent with Kant is that happiness really plays no role in the greatest good.

However, let us consider what happiness would be if we accept his concept of "worthiness to be happy." Let us suppose that, contrary to the above, there is some content to his concept of happiness in this formulation. If we do, we find another concept of happiness lurking in Kant's system based on the kind of reward we might receive for being worthy. This condition, mentioned above, is based on some reward given to us by God, which assumes the immortality of the soul. God rewards us for a virtuous life, and immortality assures that we can be rewarded. However, if this happiness is something given to us by God, it is certainly not the same as the subjective concept that Kant generally holds. I cannot hope to state what such a concept might consist of, but it is certainly something more sublime than inclinational happiness. In this case, happiness is something we seek, but know not what it is. To this extent, it is like his account of inclinational happiness. The important point is

---

14. Ibid. p. 61.

15. Beck, op. cit., p. 244.

that whatever it is one is worthy of, it is something radically different from the other concepts of happiness that can be identified.

These possibilities show the ambiguity of Kant's concept of happiness, which makes it difficult to determine what he meant. When determining the foundation for ethics, he used a subjectivist account that he rightly rejected. When focused of the entire good of persons, happiness became a necessary complement of virtue. Kant used the concept as a foil in one case and a reward in the other. This ambiguity reveals Kant's struggle with the issue of motivation in his ethical system. Speaking of happiness as a reward in the afterlife was Kant's attempt to provide a motivating factor that was not as sterile as duty for its own sake.

Another problem with "worthiness to be happy" concerns its role in the motivation to be moral. Kant claimed that, "the highest good may be the entire object of a pure practical reason, i.e., of a pure will, it is still not to be taken as the determining ground of the pure will; the moral law alone must be seen as the ground."<sup>16</sup> So, the highest good is not an independent determining ground in addition to or in place of the moral law. If it were, the good will would lose its force as the sole unconditioned good. The highest good can, and must, be the object of the moral will; and because of the finite and sensible nature of persons, the concept of the highest good is necessary to the moral disposition.

The problem is that if the highest good is not a determining ground of the moral will, then it is a superfluous concept. Although it may be necessary as an object for the pure practical will, the necessity is a formal or logical one; as such, it carries no real weight for a sensible creature. If it is to be anything more than a necessary condition in this formal sense, then it contradicts what Kant said concerning the motives for a moral action. If we take the highest good as a motivating factor, it contradicts what he said about the good will. We would have to assume that it is in some way good in itself, but only the good will is good in itself. Since an action is good only in so far as it is done for the sake of duty, we could not, without contradiction, take the highest good as any kind of motivating factor. If we did, we are forced to conclude that there is an action done from something other than duty that is good. Therefore, we seem obliged to conclude that the role of happiness in Kant's concept of the summum bonum is either meaningless or contradictory.

The ambiguity of Kant's concept of happiness is most likely a result of his struggle with the issue of motivation. He understood that happiness was a motivating factor in morality, and it was essential that people have at least the hope of happiness. More than likely he thought of it as an ideal, something that one can never attain. This is evident in the following passage from the *Critique of Pure Reason* (809a-837b):

It is in the view of reason, in the field of its theoretical employment, no less necessary to assume that everyone has ground to

---

16. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 113.

hope for happiness in the measure in which he has rendered himself by his conduct worthy of it, and that the system of morality is therefore inseparably, though only in the idea of pure reason, bound up with that of happiness.

Beck claims that this means that, "the highest good is not a practical concept at all, but a dialectical Ideal of reason."<sup>17</sup> As an ideal, the concept of happiness has no important practical consequences other than those drawn from the concept of virtue because all the moral consequences of the supreme good are drawn from the concept of duty. This is clearly stated by Kant when he wrote, "morality, by itself, constitutes a system. Happiness, however, does not do so, save in so far as it is distributed in exact proportion to morality" (811a-839b)

The summum bonum, then, has no practical significance in Kant's system; its purpose is solely architectonic, i.e., it unites a single idea under both theoretical and practical reason.<sup>18</sup> The result is an a priori synthesis of this end into Kant's system of ends, but one lacking any practical consequences because Kant found nothing but a contingent connection between the idea of virtue and happiness. Hence, the summum bonum is the basis for an intelligible, i.e. moral, world. Kant thought we must see ourselves as belonging to the moral world; however, our senses present nothing to us but the world of appearances. Therefore, we must conclude that the moral world is a future world whose entrance is dependent upon our conduct in the world of appearances. Obviously, we cannot attain happiness in this world, the world of sense, because it is impossible to do so. To this degree we may say that Kant presents us with a philosophy of pessimism since it is impossible to be happy in this world, and we can never know if there is some other world in which we can be happy in proportion to virtue.

As if the concept were not ambiguous enough, there is another meaning of happiness that can be found. Kant mentioned a type of contentment that comes from fulfilling a purpose derived from reason alone. He claimed that, "reason, which recognizes as its highest practical function the establishment of a good will, in attaining this end is capable only of its own peculiar kind of contentment."<sup>20</sup> This is certainly not the same as happiness, at least not as we have seen it defined up to this point. Further, it is a negative concept only, a contentment or satisfaction in doing without the desires of the inclinational self. Paton says it is "a consolation or inner peace which a man may have even in distress, if he has acted well."<sup>21</sup> Still, this is not happiness, nor is it the reason one ought to act morally. Kant made this clear when he

---

17. Beck, op. cit., p. 145.

18. Ibid.

20. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, p. 64.

21. Paton, op. cit., p. 57.

said, "that the consciousness of having done his duty must come first."<sup>22</sup> The interesting thing about this passage is that just before saying this, Kant changed from calling this feeling contentment to calling it happiness. He said, "when the reflective man has overcome the incentives to vice and is conscious of having done his often painful duty, he finds himself in a state which could well be called happiness, a state of contentment and peace of soul in which virtue is its own reward."<sup>23</sup>

It appears as if we can now add another candidate to Kant's growing list of meanings for happiness. In this case, happiness is almost identical to the Stoic concept of tranquility. Of course, Kant rejected the Stoic relation between virtue and happiness.<sup>24</sup> Still, the above quote is certainly in the spirit of Stoicism. However we categorize this new concept, it is certain that it is not his subjective account of happiness, nor is it the happiness given by God. Rather, it appears as if virtue is constitutive of happiness. In this respect, the formulation is very much akin to the ancient concept of happiness. Although I think this is a much better concept than his subjective account, it causes serious problems for Kant's system. If virtue and happiness are identical, then happiness can be considered as an end of action. Of course, Kant denies that virtue and happiness are identical.<sup>25</sup>

We may conclude that Kant's concept of happiness is hopelessly ambiguous, and we are left to wonder why this is so. I believe the ambiguity is the result of his struggle with the need for a practical motivating factor in an ethical system that provided no systemically important place for happiness. This is due primarily to his understanding of happiness as subjective. Being subjective, happiness can have no place in a formal system of ethics; yet he understands that happiness is an influential motivator in human life, perhaps the most influential. This is the essence of the clash between the theoretical and sensual worlds that, according to Kant, we all inhabit. In the end, he admitted, "that in order to bring an untrained and unmanageable spirit into the path of virtue we must first attract it by a view of its own advantage or alarm it by fear of loss."<sup>26</sup> This is a clear indication of his struggle with the issue of motivation. The fact that a philosopher of Kant's stature became entangled in the ambiguities of happiness indicates its importance to ethics.

---

22. Kant, *The Doctrine of Virtue*, p. 34.

23. Ibid.

24. Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 115-116.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid. p. 156.

## Popper on “Social Engineering”: A Classical Liberal View

Thomas Avery  
St. John’s University

In *The Poverty of Historicism*, and again in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Karl R. Popper used the phrases “social engineering” and “social technology” when writing about social and political reform. In the former book, he coined the terms “piecemeal social engineering” and “utopian social engineering” to denote two different approaches to reform.<sup>1</sup> In the latter book, Popper shortened these terms to “piecemeal engineering” and “utopian engineering.”

In this paper I will examine critically what Popper said about social engineering. First, I will argue that in distinguishing between what he called its “piecemeal” and its “utopian” varieties, Popper confused two entirely different issues. His case for the former, and against the latter, is marred by this confusion. Second, I will argue that Popper overlooked important problems with certain kinds of piecemeal engineering. Finally, I will argue that what I will call “piecemeal utopian political reform” is a defensible approach that is not vulnerable to Popper’s arguments against utopian social engineering.

### **Popper on Social Engineering**

Although Popper did not coin the term “social engineering,” the terms “piecemeal social engineering” (or “piecemeal engineering”) and “utopian social engineering” (or “utopian engineering”), and the distinction between the two, are his. Popper argued passionately for the former and against the latter.

In *The Poverty of Historicism*, Popper began with a discussion of the doctrine that gave that book its name. In his criticism of what he called “historicism” he contrasted two kinds of predictions.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Although Popper acknowledged Friedrich Hayek’s objections to the “engineering approach” to social problems, he continued to use the term “engineering” when writing about reform.

<sup>2</sup> Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, third edition, 1961), p. 43.

Reason Papers 26 (Summer 2000): 29-38. Copyright © 2000

In the one case we are told about an event which we can do nothing to prevent. I shall call such a prediction a '*prophecy*'. ... Opposed to these are predictions of the second kind, which we can describe as technological predictions since predictions of this kind form a basis of engineering. They are, so to speak, constructive, intimating the steps open to us *if* we want to achieve certain results [Emphasis in the original].

Unlike the historicist, thought Popper, the social technologist does not tell us how to adjust to coming events that we can do nothing to prevent, events that we can supposedly predict on the basis of laws of historical development. Instead the technologist tells us what we need to know "if we want to achieve certain results."<sup>3</sup>

In opposition to the historicist methodology, we could conceive of a methodology which aims at a *technological social science*. Such a methodology would lead to the study of the general laws of social life with the aim of finding all those facts which would be indispensable as a basis for the work of everyone seeking to reform social institutions [Emphasis in the original].

There are, Popper contended, two basically different ways in which social engineers can use the results of a technological social science to reform social institutions and this led him to his distinction between two kinds of social engineering.<sup>4</sup>

Just as the main task of the physical engineer is to design machines and to remodel and service them, the task of the piecemeal social engineer is to design social institutions and to reconstruct and run those already in existence....

Holistic or Utopian social engineering, as opposed to piecemeal social engineering,...aims at remodelling the 'whole of society' in accordance with a definite plan or blueprint...

In *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper elaborated on this distinction between the piecemeal and the utopian types of social engineering. According to him, the utopian approach flows from an insistence on determining one's ultimate political goal, one's ideal state, *before* taking any

---

<sup>3</sup> Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, p. 46.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65, 67.

practical action.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the piecemeal approach, again according to Popper, flows from the insistence on attempting to locate and eradicate the greatest and most urgent social evils.<sup>6</sup> Utopian social engineering, Popper claimed, requires the centralized rule of a few, the suppression of dissent and, ultimately, the use of violence instead of reason to settle the disputes that arise in the pursuit of the ultimate goals of the engineers. Piecemeal social engineering, he claimed, allows for democratic action, the tolerance of dissent and the use of reason and compromise to settle political disputes.<sup>7</sup>

Especially odious to Popper were the brutal methods that he associated with utopian engineering. The “canvas cleaning” approach to the reconstruction of society that he found in Plato’s *Republic* seemed to him a terrible foreshadowing of the horrors inflicted upon millions of human beings by the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> Attempting to wipe the slate clean and redraw an entire society from scratch, based on a blueprint drawn up by visionaries, is not what he deemed a rational kind of social engineering and can only lead to disaster.<sup>9</sup>

Even with the best intentions of making heaven on earth  
it only succeeds in making it hell—that hell which man alone  
prepares for his fellow-men.

### “Piecemeal” vs. “Utopian” Social Engineering

There are, I believe, two important problems with Popper’s analysis of social engineering and his criticism of utopian social engineering. The first, which I will consider in this section, is that in distinguishing between the piecemeal and the utopian brand of social engineering, he confused two entirely different issues. The second, which I will consider in the next section, is that he did not address some of the pitfalls of the nonutopian piecemeal approach that he himself plainly favored.

---

<sup>5</sup> Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, fifth edition, 1966), Vol. 1, p. 157.

<sup>6</sup> Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. 1, p. 158.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 159-168.

<sup>8</sup> Popper’s interpretation of Plato is, of course, controversial. As he saw it, utopian social engineers had to wipe the slate (canvas) clean before constructing the ideal society.

<sup>9</sup> Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. 1, p. 168. The disasters that followed the Bolshevik Revolution, and similar revolutions in China, Cambodia and elsewhere, are detailed in *The Black Book of Communism*. It seems, however, that the human carnage in these cases was not so much “canvas cleaning” in Popper’s sense as it was the brutal suppression of anyone who threatened either the power, or the long-term or short-term goals of the revolutionaries.

The first problem is that Popper confused the question of the presence or absence of a set of “utopian” principles to guide political reform with the scope of a given effort at reform or of a given stage of reform. It is true that he allowed the possibility that piecemeal social engineers might be guided by a utopian vision.<sup>10</sup>

The politician who adopts this [piecemeal] method may or may not have a blueprint of society before his mind, he may or may not hope that mankind will one day realize an ideal state, and achieve happiness and perfection on earth. But he will be aware that perfection, if at all attainable, is far distant and that every generation of men, and therefore also the living, have a claim...

He seems, however, not to have realized what an important concession to utopianism this is. If piecemeal engineers can be guided by the vision of an ideal society then it is possible for a group of them to have exactly the same utopian vision for the whole of society as a different group of social engineers whom Popper would label “utopian.” It may seem preferable to stick with the label “holistic” for the latter group since the words “piecemeal” and “holistic” seem to capture better the distinction that Popper had in mind. Unfortunately, however, the word “holistic” also has drawbacks in this context since both groups of reformers may have a vision for the whole of society and either group can be distinguished from reformers who seek to make one specific reform in order to eliminate one identifiable source of human suffering.<sup>11</sup>

Popper often insisted that he was loath to engage in verbal disputes but there is a genuine dispute here that is about more than the meanings of words. The difference between our first two groups of social engineers is not a difference in the vision that inspires their reform. There need not even be a difference in the empirical hypotheses that they take from “technological social science” to guide them in their reform efforts. The difference is in the way in which the two groups plan to implement their reforms. One group proposes to construct a new society from scratch, as it were, and the other proposes to change the existing society one step at a time. This is a difference that makes a difference.

We can hardly fault Popper for criticizing the brutal methods of some social engineers but it seems to me misleading to call their approach “utopian” or even “holistic.” It is better, I think, to label the two types of social engineering “revolutionary” and “evolutionary.” This would help avoid

---

<sup>10</sup> Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, p. 158.

<sup>11</sup> An organization whose only mission is to press for tougher measures against drunk drivers is a good example of a group of non-utopian piecemeal reformers.



confusing two entirely different issues: the scope of a given effort at (or stage of) reform and the scope of the vision that inspires the reformers.

### **Problems with “Piecemeal” Engineering**

In addition to confusing two different issues, Popper overlooked an important problem with the kind of piecemeal approach to reform that he himself favored. He acknowledged that even the most carefully considered reform may have unintended (and undesirable) consequences. It seems to me, however, that piecemeal reform designed to cure one specific ill, to reduce or eliminate one area of human suffering, can very easily create unanticipated problems in other areas. In fact, one of the benefits of theories about the whole (or at least a large portion) of society is that they can tell us when changes in one area are likely to create problems somewhere else.

It is also possible that a series of two or more piecemeal reforms that are not guided by some fairly comprehensive theory will have unintended consequences that none of the reforms by themselves would have. They may, for example, largely cancel each other’s effects.<sup>12</sup> It is true, of course, that reformers who are constantly alert to the unintended consequences of their intended actions might become aware of such a result. It is also true, however, that this result might, in some cases, have been avoided if the reformers had been guided by a theory drawn up on the basis of a comprehensive social theory.

### **Piecemeal Utopian Reform: An Outline**

In this section I will discuss an approach to political and social reform that can be called “piecemeal utopian reform” and in the next section I will argue that this approach can be defended against all of the criticisms that Popper leveled against utopian social engineering. Although this general approach has often been discussed among libertarians and classical liberals, it may not be clear how to reconcile it with Popper’s useful insights.

First, let me briefly characterize what I call “piecemeal utopian reform.” It is an evolutionary or gradualist approach that resembles Popper’s piecemeal social engineering in that it proceeds one step at a time and does not attempt to rebuild the whole of society from scratch or abolish all undesired institutions at once.

Piecemeal utopian reform can be in the private sector or the public sector. Reform in the private sector (which might simply be called “social reform”) may involve the provision of a new kind of social service by a voluntary nonprofit group or the provision of a new kind of good or service by a profit-making enterprise. Reform in the public sector (for which the term “political reform” might be reserved) may involve a change in the provision of

---

<sup>12</sup> An increase in the maximum penalty for certain crimes combined with a relaxation of strict parole policies may be a good example of two piecemeal reforms that tend to cancel each others’ effects.

a governmental service or in the manner of paying for this service or it may involve a change in the basic legal framework of society.<sup>13</sup>

Political reform can be negative as well as positive. Keeping in mind that Popper's piecemeal social engineers are supposed to be alert to the unintended consequences of the changes that they (or others) institute, one of the aims of piecemeal utopian political reform, is the undoing of previous bits of social engineering that have had undesirable consequences.

I contend that piecemeal utopian reform can be defended against all of the criticisms that Popper leveled against utopian social engineering. The first basic criticism might be called an epistemological one; the other criticisms, political or ethical ones.

#### **Piecemeal Utopian Reform: A Defense**

One of Popper's criticisms is an epistemological one that concerns not so much the scope of a set of reforms (or stage of reform) as the manner of settling the issue. How far-reaching should a given set of reforms be? Popper argued that utopian social engineers have decided a priori that reconstructing the whole society from the ground up is the only way to reform their society.<sup>14</sup>

One of the differences between the Utopian or holistic approach and the piecemeal approach may therefore be stated in this way: while the piecemeal engineer can attack his problem with an open mind as to the scope of the reform, the holist cannot do this; for he has decided beforehand that a complete reconstruction is possible and necessary.

Piecemeal social engineers, on the other hand, can afford to base their decision about the scope of a political or social reform on empirical evidence. This surely seems a point in favor of piecemeal social engineering, if only because utopian social engineering is characterized in such a way as to preclude the experimental approach to this question.

I contend that there is no special problem here for piecemeal utopians. Although their long-term goal is to reform the whole of society, they needn't decide a priori how best to do this nor how long it will take. The scope of a given stage of reform will no doubt depend upon many factors, including, for example, the extent of the citizens' support for the program of reform at any given time. The speed with which a program of reform is implemented will also depend upon many factors, such as the degree of success of the earliest changes in meeting citizens' expectations. There is no

---

<sup>13</sup> Reforms that are changes in the legal framework might, perhaps, better not be thought of as "engineering" at all. (See, for example, Friedrich Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science*, pp. 165-182.)

<sup>14</sup> Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, p. 69.

reason, however, why piecemeal utopians need to be dogmatic about either issue. Their approach to reform does not decide this question in advance of experience and they can adjust their program depending upon the results of their initial experiments in reform.

Popper also leveled two closely related ethical and political criticisms against utopian social engineering. The first is that utopian engineers have to proceed without the consent of the majority because it is very difficult to get a majority to support a blueprint for the whole of society. They will therefore, he argued, have to rely on the centralized rule of one person or a few persons. This criticism, Popper contended, does not apply to piecemeal social engineering since it needn't be difficult at all to get a majority to support a particular reform aimed at alleviating an easily identifiable source of human suffering.<sup>15</sup>

In favour of his method, the piecemeal engineer can claim that a systematic fight against suffering and injustice is more likely to be supported by the approval and agreement of a great number of people than the fight for the establishment of some ideal.

The second criticism is that utopian social engineers have to suppress dissent because their plans will inconvenience many people over a long period of time and will no doubt encounter widespread resistance. Since the engineers cannot allow this resistance to prevent them from laying the groundwork that their program requires, they cannot tolerate open dissent.

We might call the first of these problems the majoritarian problem and the second the civil libertarian problem and we can acknowledge that in each case Popper has a point. They are not, however, points that can be made against piecemeal utopian reform.

Let's grant that the authoritarian rule of a single dictator or of a small dictatorial committee would be required by "utopian" (i.e., revolutionary) social engineering. Let's also grant that Popper is right that even the most benevolent of authoritarian rulers would be hard pressed to get the necessary information to determine if the revolutionary program was working out according to plan. There is not any reason to believe that piecemeal utopian reform needs to be authoritarian. Piecemeal utopians need not get the agreement of the majority to the blueprint. By proceeding one reform at a time, they may be able to build a series of alliances such that a majority supports each reform, although only a minority approves of the blueprint as a whole. This need not involve any attempt on the part of the utopians to deceive their fellow citizens or conceal their ultimate goals.

There are pitfalls here, of course, in the making of alliances with groups that do not share the reformers' long-range goals. There are also some

---

<sup>15</sup> Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, p. 158.

difficult strategic and tactical challenges. There are, however, no grounds for deciding that piecemeal utopian reformers can't proceed without the support of the majority for their entire program, provided that they can mobilize enough support at each stage of reform.

Furthermore, the program that the populace is asked to support may not contain a detailed blueprint of the future society but only what might be called a "blueprint-in-outline" of utopia. Indeed, on some views the proper goal for reform is not so much a utopia as a framework for utopias.<sup>16</sup> Let private individuals and voluntary groups of such individuals experiment with their own utopian schemes within a legal framework that allows for such experimentation. The utopia at which piecemeal reformers aim may be an anarchistic or minimal statist society in which various people have their own blueprints and it may not be possible to give anything more than a blueprint-in-outline of such a society.

The civil libertarian problem, I believe, tells against any attempt by revolutionaries to rebuild the whole of society from the ground up. Because any attempt at such thoroughgoing change is bound to inconvenience most, if not all, of the citizens very severely there is bound to be a great deal of criticism of the program. Once the social engineers have decided to proceed they will have to turn a deaf ear to this criticism if they hope to accomplish anything at all. Popper's criticism is well taken.

There is a civil libertarian problem, however, not because the long-term goal is to remake the whole of society but because the short-term goal is to sweep away the present society and to lay the foundations without which the long-term goal is supposedly unachievable. The severity of the dislocations will both require widespread cooperation and provoke widespread resistance.

Piecemeal utopian reformers need have no such problem. They can limit the scope of the first stage of reform if necessary and, in any case, if they overreach they may simply have to retreat. Because they have not made any a priori judgments about the scope of the first round of reform, they can be more flexible, considering both the extent of their support and the likelihood of increased or decreased support in response to the consequences of this first round of reform. They may, of course, have to alter the scope of a given reform, or the speed with which reform can be implemented in response to dissent, especially if their earliest reforms do not satisfy their fellow citizens. Here we have a problem that piecemeal utopian reformers have to solve but there is no reason to believe that this problem is insoluble.

Piecemeal utopian reformers can be open to constructive criticism from two sources: first, other reformers who share the long-term goal but disagree about the best way to achieve that goal; and second, those who do not share the long-term goal. Furthermore, even in the case of political reform,

---

<sup>16</sup> See especially Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, (Basic Books, New York, 1974) Chapter 10.

not only may piecemeal utopians be tolerant of dissent, they may be in no position to suppress dissent even if they were disposed to be intolerant of it. The mere fact that a group of utopian political reformers is able to gain enough power to present a legislative program to a democratic assembly—perhaps they have been duly elected to that assembly—is no guarantee that they have the power to suppress dissent even if they want to do so. They may, in fact, have to be especially tolerant in order to gain enough allies to get any part of their legislative program passed. They may also have to compromise in response to criticism of their program by accepting fewer changes than they really want, or by postponing some changes. In this way they may get the support that they need to achieve any reform at all.

Popper also argued that utopian social engineers cling dogmatically to their blueprint or to the theory on which it is based but piecemeal utopian reformers need not do this. It is true, of course, that reformers may cling dogmatically to their pet hypotheses but utopians have no monopoly on dogmatism. Indeed, it seems obvious from a casual observation of history and current events that there have been dogmatists who insist, regardless of the empirical evidence, that their one favorite reform will cure some pressing social ill even if (they admit) it is not a panacea. (Didn't ardent alcohol prohibitionists cling to their cherished program in defiance of evidence that it was doing more harm than good?)

On the other hand, it is quite possible that, in the course of their reforms, a group of utopians will alter their plans, perhaps by deciding to forego some of the more extreme reforms (which they might have planned to institute last, anyway). A group of individualist anarchists, for example, might agree to stop dismantling the state when they had reached a classical liberal minimal state because criticism had convinced them that a large industrial society without any government at all simply would not work.

Finally, Popper gave special attention to the problem of the successors of the utopian social engineers, arguing that even a benevolent dictator had to face the problem of choosing an equally benevolent successor. Here again, however, we have not so much a severe criticism as a problem to be solved. In the first place utopian social reformers will usually have to conduct a campaign to persuade others to support their program. There is no reason why these reformers can't seek to persuade their younger fellow citizens to join them. In fact, their most obvious source of support is exactly the young and idealistic. The utopian reformers need have no special problem with succession at all. Piecemeal utopians no doubt *will*, as Popper says that utopian social engineers *must*, have to work for a generation or more to realize their program. There is no reason, however, why younger converts to the cause cannot constantly renew their ranks so that the program can be carried to its completion after its initiators have left the scene.

### **Conclusion**

I have argued that in distinguishing between piecemeal social engineering and utopian social engineering Popper has confused two different

issues. I have also argued, somewhat briefly, that some kinds of piecemeal social engineering have pitfalls that Popper seems not to have considered. Finally I have outlined an approach that I call “piecemeal utopian reform” and have argued that it is not vulnerable to the criticisms that Popper leveled against utopian social engineering. There is much, I believe, that today’s classical liberals can learn about political reform from Karl Popper but we should consider his approach critically with the idea that although we do not need to reject it wholesale, we do need to improve upon it.

## Libertarianism vs Objectivism; A Response to Peter Schwartz<sup>1</sup>

Walter Block  
Loyola University New Orleans

For many years, Rand and the Randians would not mention libertarianism in print. To do so would be to give sanction to what they regarded as a mischievous and misbegotten political philosophy. Happily, this profoundly and intellectually source ended with the publication of Schwartz (1986). This was a no holds barred attack on several libertarian thinkers, including myself. It is a pleasure defending the philosophy of libertarianism in the present reply.

Schwartz's article is a vicious attack on libertarianism. When I first read it I cringed, not because of the ideas, which are not really that challenging, but because it is so nasty as to be almost unprecedented in what passes for scholarly writing. Rand (1964, 1967) criticized authors such as David Hume and Immanuel Kant as "whim-worshippers," "muscle-mystics," "Huns," and "Attilas," and Schwartz is an apt student of hers in this regard. Such verbiage is hardly welcome in rational discourse.

According to Schwartz libertarianism amounts to nihilism. The chief nihilist, as it happens, is Block (1991). It is important that there be a systematic to reply to this document<sup>2</sup>. There have been many criticisms of libertarianism over the years, from the left. As a result, advocates of this philosophy are accustomed to dealing with charges that the free enterprise system is heartless and pro poverty. Attacks from the right are a new challenge<sup>3</sup>. Second, a reply gives us an opportunity to further reflect on the essence of libertarianism. Schwartz attacks libertarianism at its very roots.

### 1. Too heterogeneous

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on two speeches on this subject made to the Greater Vancouver Libertarian Association, and to the Laissez Faire Books Supper Club in New York City, both in 1986. I thank Paul Geddes of the GVLA, and the Andrea Rich of LF Books for their support.

<sup>2</sup> For other libertarian replies to Schwartz (1986), see Miller and Evoy (1987), Bergland (1986). All otherwise unidentified quotations are from Schwartz (1986).

<sup>3</sup> Libertarianism is considered by many to occupy a position on the political economic spectrum of the extreme right. Thus, there are virtually no critiques of this perspective from anyone who might be placed on the right side of this spectrum. For a possible exception, see Friedman-Block unpublished letters, 1999.

Schwartz's first criticism is that libertarianism is merely a united front, thus is an amalgamation under the same umbrella of people who have very different ideas. His charge is that libertarianism is so weird that it can even embrace Nazism. Schwartz criticizes Murray Rothbard as follows: "If one were to take his fatuous reasoning seriously, one could just as well bring Naziism into libertarianism's united front. After all, the value of a liberated proletariat or of a purified Aryan race cannot really be achieved, the libertarian would argue, except through uncoerced action. Nazis need not repudiate their philosophies, they just have to call for the factory owners to hand over their property to their workers in the case of Marxists, or for the newspapers and book publishers to adhere to the party line, or for the Jews to walk into the gas chambers voluntarily. Only then, when political freedom reigns can the goals of the Hitlers and Stalins be realized. If absolute submission to the state is the virtue they want to implant, they must persuade people to submit voluntarily. So there is nothing necessarily unlibertarian about the basic moral tenets of dictatorship. Only when some tyrant misguidedly believes that these tenets can be implemented by force do libertarians begin to criticize. In other words, the ends of Nazi Germany are consistent with libertarianism. It is just their coercive means that are not."

This reminds me of an interesting story. I once ran into some Neo-Nazis at a libertarian conference. Don't ask, they must have sneaked in under our supposedly united front umbrella. I was in a grandiose mood, thinking that I could convert anyone to libertarianism, and said to them, "Look, we libertarians will give you a better deal than the liberals. We'll let you goose-step. You can exhibit the swastika on your own property. We'll let you march any way you wish on your own property. We'll let you sing Nazi songs. Any Jews that you get on a voluntary basis to go to a concentration camp, fine."

I agree with Schwartz on this. The problem with Nazism is *not* its ends, from the libertarian point of view, rather it is with their means. Namely, they engaged in coercion. But, the ends are as just as any others; namely, they do not involve invasions. If you like saluting and swastikas, and racist theories, that too is part and parcel of liberty. Freedom includes the right to salute the Nazi flag, and to embrace doctrines that are personally obnoxious to me.

Under the libertarian code, you should not be put in jail for doing that no matter how horrendous this may appear to some. I happen to be Jewish, and my grandmother is probably spinning in her grave as I write this because we lost many relatives in the Nazi concentration camps. It's a vicious thing that the Nazis did, but the evil of it consists of the coerciveness. If it had not been for the coercion, Nazism would have been completely defanged, as far as the law ought to be concerned. Libertarians oppose Nazis for their use of coercion, not because of their emblems or their marches or their songs or their views. Libertarianism is a theory concerning the just use of violence. Should people be put in jail because they have views which dismay most of us? Would Schwartz and the objectivists really incarcerate Nazis or Communists



who took no coercive actions whatsoever? If so, then I am over generous to them in maintaining we have no disagreements as far as political economy are concerned.

## 2. No foundation

Schwartz's next attack on libertarianism is that we start in mid-stream. We have arbitrary assertions. "Since the libertarian rejects all values" (for Schwartz, we reject all values because we don't start with A is A) "he has no coherent position on the question of force. He certainly does not regard it as a violation of individual rights because rights are a moral concept and are therefore alien to libertarianism. Rather he (the libertarian) views this from the perspective of a pure emotionalist and simply asserts that force is the interference with people's wishes and that people's wishes should not be interfered with."

Again, Schwartz: "Libertarianism very studiously avoids taking any position on liberty's intellectual foundation. If people announce that they are for liberty, libertarianism does not care whether they arrived at that conclusion because they believe that man's mind is too flawed to be certain of how to rule autocratically, or because they feel that the imperatives of hedonism demand political freedom, or because they have received a revelation from the spirit of Vishnu or because of no reason whatsoever. All are equally welcome into the libertarian fold." Further, "The philosophical avenues that lead to libertarianism as one *Reason Magazine* columnist put it are varied and many."

I agree, for the most part, with Schwartz's charges, but deny they denigrate the case for libertarianism. We *are* varied and many. We only have one thing in common. The non-aggression and the private property axioms. Here is Schwartz yet again: "Libertarianism comes from nowhere in particular, no philosophical base is necessary -- and leads to nowhere in particular, no values are better or worse than any other. Libertarianism starts with the brute observation that people have desires. Where they come from and whether they are right or wrong, are of no concern. And it offers as the whole of its message, a single emotional ejaculation, to act on these desires without restraint."

This is not entirely accurate. Each libertarian has his own foundation - or none - for private property and non-aggression. What we have in common are just these two axioms. But there is nothing wrong with specialization and the division of labour, even in intellectual pursuits. What compels all philosophies to espouse a complete perspective of life from soup to nuts? Why do we all have to go from A to A, all the way down to Z is Z. Can some of us not specialize in political philosophy? If so, "What is so irrational about that," I would ask; and would answer, "Nothing at all."

## 3. Lawlessness

Schwartz states, "Libertarians direct their antipathy against any limitations upon human conduct, including those enacted through the legitimate state function of identifying and banning the use of force. Law as such, is an anathema to libertarians who reject all standards of behaviour on

principle. They abhor the law because, it tells them in effect, that they can not do whatever they fell like doing.” But this interprets libertarianism a do-your-own-thing philosophy, including the initiation of force. Here Schwartz misunderstands libertarianism. If it has any one principle, is that no one should initiate force against non-aggressors.

He responds by denying that we can define force: “By dispensing with ethical fundamentals, not only are libertarians unable to justify liberty, they can not even define it. Liberty is the condition of not being subject to the initiation of physical force, but what is force? A punch in the nose may be a clear example, but what about theft which involves no action directly upon any person? Or trespassing which imposes no apparent harm or loss.”

But this ignores the fact that the non-aggression axiom does not exhaust the basic premises of libertarianism. There is also a very clear definition of private property. So, as long as we know what a person’s legitimately owned property is, we can very easily define force, certainly so as to preclude trespass. There are, to be sure, grey areas. Just how far from your nose does my fist have to be, before it can be considered a threat of force? This is a continuum problem, and there are no obvious cut and dried answers to it. If libertarianism cannot set up a non-ambiguous line between force and non force in such contexts, then neither can anyone else, up to and including Objectivists.

#### **4. Parasitism**

The next charge is that libertarianism is a parasite on objectivism. According to Schwartz: “Libertarianism’s relationship to objectivism is actually not merely that of antagonist, but that of parasite. For without objectivism, there would ironically be no libertarian movement today.” And again, “Libertarianism wants to use the words of objectivism’s non-initiation of force principle, but not the ideas that give it meaning.” In the view of Rand (1982, p. 15): “There are sundry 'libertarians', who plagiarize the Objectivist theory of politics, while rejecting the metaphysics, epistemology and ethics on which it rests.” Bidinotto (1997) characterized these as “fighting words (which) set the theme for a feud between libertarians and Objectivists that continues to this day.”

Let me make another concession to Schwartz: had it not been for objectivism, rather, had it not been for the writings of Ayn Rand, the libertarian movement would have been much smaller than it is today. We libertarians owe a great debt to Ayn Rand, because many of us came to our present positions through reading her works.

But then, Schwartz talks about objectivism’s non-initiation of force principle as if it started with Ayn Rand. But, anyone who has read any of the following authors knows that it wasn’t original with her, that there is a whole classical liberal tradition which is the predecessor to her own version libertarianism. It includes scholars such as Spencer, Spooner, Tucker, Warren, Locke, Rousseau, Hobbes, Hume, Auberon Herbert, Paine, Cobden and Bright, just to mention a few.

### 5. Excessive

Our author charges that libertarians are overly tolerant of all sorts of positions, such as those held by: Nazis, feminists, gays, black studies “scholars,” but are extremely fastidious when it comes to Objectivism. Libertarians have indeed been very critical of Randians. Part of this has to do with “product differentiation”. Here there are two close substitutes; the world can barely distinguish between what it sees as the Tweedledee of libertarianism and the Tweedledum of Objectivism. Both favour freedom; both oppose welfare; neither supports socialism; both are against anything but laissez faire capitalism. It is thus more incumbent than otherwise on each group to distinguish itself from the other. Libertarians have been highly critical of objectivists, and, of course, the reverse has been true as well. It works both ways.

However, although libertarians have criticized objectivists they have also gone out of their way to be very, very complementary, and have expressed great admiration for objectivists, which has rarely if ever been reciprocated. For example, in my own book, (Block, 1976), the dedication page reads as follows: “This book is dedicated to those who have taught me political economy, and inspired me with a passion for justice.” Among the seven people mentioned are Ayn Rand and Nathaniel Branden.

Another instance of this is from Branden (1986, ch. 33). She lists numerous scholars who have been very complimentary toward objectivists. The ones I recognize as libertarians include: Anne Wortham; Dick Randolph and Ken Fanning (former libertarian members of the Alaska state legislature); Martin Anderson, David Henderson, Tibor Machan, Jennifer Roback; Tonie Nathan (the first woman to win an Electoral College vote); Murray Rothbard, who is viciously criticized in this book, had this to say: “He is in agreement basically with all of Rand’s philosophy, and that it was she who had convinced him of the theory of natural rights which all his books uphold.” “Without Ayn Rand,” said David Nolan the founder of the Libertarian Party, “the libertarian movement would not exist.” David Walter said, “the Society for Individual Liberty (a libertarian group) is primarily based upon Objectivist principles, and the basic works of Rand continue to be the most powerful influence on our membership.” Other libertarians who have said very nice things about objectivists, according to Barbara Branden include: Ed Clark; Dean Ahmed, Jack High, Eric Mack, Jeffery Paul, John Nelson, Joe Kalt, Fred Miller, Harry Watson, Douglas Rasmussen, Douglas Den Uyl. In the view of Jack High of George Mason University, “Most of the young economists who are Austrians in the tradition of Ludwig von Mises have been influenced by Ayn Rand.” Robert Nozick, (during his libertarian days) said, “I have found her two major novels exciting, powerful illuminating and thought provoking combined with a sense of life that is worthy of man. Miss Rand is an interesting thinker worthy of attention.” But, this by no means exhausts the list. Others include Robert Ringer, Doug Casey, James Blanchard, Daniel Rosenthal, Harry Schultz, John Pugsley, Robert Kephart, Ron Paul, Neil Schulman, Wendy McElroy, George

Smith, Karl Hess, Durk Pearson, Sandy Shaw, and last but not least, myself. We are all libertarians who have said nice things about objectivists.

Certainly the reciprocation has not been there. At least until the split, there were no objectivists who said anything nice about libertarians or libertarianism. Anyone who did so would have been summarily purged. Rand dismissed libertarians as “hippies of the right.”<sup>4</sup>

Actually, the exact opposite of Schwartz’s contention is true. It is objectivists who are extremely fastidious when it comes to libertarians, applying criterion not used for anyone else. For example, when Nixon and Hospers (a friend of hers) were running against each other for President of the U.S., Rand favored Nixon the republican vis a vis Hospers who ran on the Libertarian Party ticket. She has gone so far as to say that she would rather vote for a communist than a libertarian. Not only that, but she has ignored us all her life. She never wrote word one about libertarians, except for that curt dismissal of as “hippies.” How then can we account for this state of affairs? One possibility is that libertarians far outnumber objectivists, much to Rand’s consternation, and that she was only showing her pique at this state of affairs.

In Schwartz (1986), the typical objectivist’s vitriolic tone and the great disdain are very much evident. Out of his entire 80-page booklet, fully twenty-five percent of the material is devoted to attacking me (Block, 1976). I wrote Schwartz a letter asking if he would contemplate publishing a rebuttal? He did not even condescend to directly reply to me. Instead his secretary wrote me a letter saying, “Mr. Schwartz will be publishing a series of paragraphs on this book, and you can write a paragraph.” The disdain is very much alive.

### **6. Too contentious**

The next criticism that Schwartz levels at libertarianism is that we differ among ourselves. “There are so many disagreements on basic questions of liberty within the libertarian movement. That is why libertarianism readily accommodates a conglomeration of mutually incompatible groups.”

In contrast of course, the Randians don’t disagree on anything<sup>5</sup>. The explanation for this state of affairs is that Objectivism is a cult. Branden (1986) denies this, but she defines cults in religious terms, and obviously objectivism cannot be considered a religious cult. All members are very definitely atheists, and outspoken ones at that. But, apart from that one issue, it cannot be denied that they are cultish. There is the godhead or godheadess who holds forth. Anyone who disagrees with her view is purged. There is

---

<sup>4</sup> States Bidinotto (1997): “Past Objectivist critiques of libertarianism (including, I regret to say, some of my own) have too often failed to discriminate among various types of libertarians. Ayn Rand dismissed libertarians as ‘anarchists’ and ‘hippies of the Right’—unfairly lumping together serious thinkers with anti-intellectual libertines. Peter Schwartz’s vituperative essay, “Libertarianism: The Perversion of Liberty,” descended from lumping to smearing.

<sup>5</sup> Again, this applies only to the pre-split days.

intellectual bullying, there is irrationality in the name of rationality. When Branden and Rand split, Rand asked all of her followers to take her side without explaining to them so much as what the issues were. She asked them to take her on faith even though she preaches against anyone taking anything on this basis. This is irrationality in the name of rationality.

This was the Randian cult. On a personal note, when I would ask my Randian acquaintances for their view on an event or issue, they would often not reply. Instead, they would say they had to think about it and would get back to me in a few days. All too often I was told privately, they had to check back with the head office because if they got caught saying something at variance with the cult leader, it was out of the Randian movement for them.

Has this cultism vanished? Not at all within the Piekoff part of the movement. Consider the June 26, 1986 publication of their cult periodical, the so called *Intellectual Activist*: “Robert Hessen (until this issue, a leading Randian) is no long associated with the Intellectual Activist in any manner whatsoever.” Period. That was it. No explanation whatsoever. I telephoned him, and asked, “What happened? Did he think that two plus two was five? Perhaps that A doesn’t equal A or something?” No, he told me, he liked Barbara Branden’s (1986) book.

Here is another statement by Piekoff which appeared in the May 26, 1986 issue of that publication: “The forthcoming biography of Ayn Rand by Barbara Branden was undertaken against Miss Rand’s wishes. Miss Rand severed relationships with Mrs. Branden in 1968 regarding her as immoral and as an enemy of objectivism. Being aware of Mrs. Branden’s long time hostility to Miss Rand, including her public attacks on Miss Rand after her death, attacks interlarded with protestations of adulation, I have refused for years to meet with Mrs. Branden or to cooperate with her on this project. I had no reason to believe that the book would be either a truthful representation of Ayn Rand’s life or an accurate statement of her ideas. Advanced reports from several readers of the book in galley form, have confirmed my expectations. Therefore, I certainly do not recommend this book. As for myself, I have not read it and do not intend to do so.” How is that for thinking for yourself?

Libertarians disagree with each other because we are individuals. We are bright, but imperfect. We think for ourselves and the world is complex. We’re a political movement, not a cult. That’s why we disagree with each other, on occasion. Disagreements, fights, splits, even hatreds, yes. But no one party line. We have a *healthy* diversity.

If there is any person in the libertarian movement who could be considered a candidate for cult leader, it would be Murray Rothbard (“Mr. Libertarian”). He was certainly a leading thinker in the libertarian movement. As a matter of fact, Murray and I were good personal friends; yet I have disagreed with him in private, and in person and in writing and in public on several issues including voluntary slavery, immigration, the flat tax, and star wars (Block, 1968, 1998, 1999A, forthcoming). But, there has never been even any hint of a purge. Were Schwartz to disagree with Rand or Peikoff or any

other top Objectivist disciple on any issue, no matter how picayune, he would be summarily dismissed from the elect.

Libertarianism is a growing vital, viable, intellectual concern and in such contexts people disagree with each other. We argue these things out. It is a market of ideas. There is nothing to be ashamed about in disagreeing with each other; the very contrary is true<sup>6</sup>.

### **7. Government**

Schwartz's first criticism concerns government. He says that libertarians are not pro-liberty but anti-state. This is very strange because the state is intrinsically coercive (Spooner, 1966; Hoppe, 1989, 1993; Rothbard, 1973, 1982). It is necessarily and always in violation of the libertarian axioms. So, if you are not aiming at liberty, but instead at being anti-state, you are going to be pro-liberty anyway. Pro-liberty and anti-state are opposite sides of the same coin.

Why? The state engages in taxation, and these levies by their very nature are coercive. It doesn't matter if government provides services in return for these taxes. Suppose I come at you with a gun, and threaten to shoot you unless you give me half of all your money. You're an argumentative sort, and you say, "But, wait a second, this is a felony! Don't you realize what you're doing? You're committing a crime." My reply, "Oh, sorry, I forgot. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you some services. Here is a paper clip." Big deal. The point is not that the government gives us services. The question is, is it a voluntary trade? It is anything but, as shown by the fact that if you don't pay your taxes, you go to the hoosegow.

To be fair to the objectivists, they do not favour taxes. They are a very strange kind of government advocate because the state and taxes go together like horse and carriage, love and marriage. How can you have a government without coercive taxes, a redundancy? According to Rand, there can be voluntary payments through government lotteries. This must be rejected, because if all a group does is organize lotteries and provide services, why call it a government? It is just a private group that holds lotteries and offers services.

There are two necessary and together sufficient elements in government. One is that it collects taxes, which are coercive by their very nature. Two, the state insists that it and only it has the right to perform the services of government in a given geographical area. Namely it demands a monopoly within a certain territory. But, this too, is coercion. Suppose I am the duly constituted government and Mr. Smith wants to set up another one in competition with mine. He promises not to initiate aggression, only to catch criminals, etc. As a government I put Mr. Smith in jail on account of treason. I am therefore guilty of coercion against an innocent non aggressive Smith, merely for having had the temerity of wanting to compete with me. Even the

---

<sup>6</sup> *The Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, Summer 1998 contains a debate among libertarians on immigration.

Randian version of government would put Mr. Smith in jail for daring to compete. We can only conclude that government is intrinsically coercive and that the Randians, in criticizing the libertarian view of the state, are acting incompatibly with their own views of private property rights and non-aggression. Supposedly, they agreed with libertarians on these matters, but when push comes to shove, they jettison this common ground in behalf of statism. Whatever became of laissez faire capitalism when it applies to competition for providing safety and protection services?

Schwartz replies that private defence agencies constitute back alley operations. With them, there will be no objective law. Decisions will be based on whim. He speaks of: "The subjectivity of anarchism, where one can seek adjudication from any back alley court which dispenses frontier justice and which is unconcerned with such niceties as rules of evidence." Why back alley? The Pinkertons, the Burns Guards, other private guards operate right out in the open. Is the Supreme Court of either Canada or the United States, with which I am most familiar, so concerned with legal niceties? For many years, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that consensual homosexual behaviour behind closed doors in the privacy of your own house is illegal. Even certain consensual heterosexual acts are or were illegal in various states of the union. Nowadays, they rule that it is a crime to discriminate against gays. This is only the tip of the iceberg. Were I to discuss the deviations from libertarianism law perpetrated by the U.S. Supreme Court, it would take many, many volumes.

Consider the law of the sea merchant which determines salvage law on the oceans; maritime law which arbitrated between entrepreneurs located in different countries. These, too, operated in the open, and in an over board manner. They used objective rules of evidence and procedure and indeed, international but *non*-governmental courts, like The Hague, took over many of these jurisdictions from what were in effect, private competing court agencies (Benson, 1989, 1990). Is the American Arbitrations Association guilty of "whim worship?"<sup>7</sup>

We know from economics that the private market is more efficient than the government. The profit and loss system guarantees that result. If a private businessman doesn't satisfy customers, he goes broke. If a government "entrepreneur" doesn't satisfy customers, wait..., the very concept is ludicrous. There *are* no government entrepreneurs. If there is consumer dissatisfaction, and people don't patronize the Post Office, will it go broke? No, government will just seize more taxes. If there is a rape on the public sidewalk, who in a position of authority, who is able to do something about this, loses money? Nobody. If there is a rape in a department store, that enterprise will be avoided by customers. Who do such enterprises hire to make sure there are no rapes? They hire private police to make sure that

---

<sup>7</sup> For the reduced role of states in providing judicial and defense services, see Van Creveld (1999).

doesn't happen. Let there be one rape in Macy's, they are in deep, dark trouble. But should this outrage occur in an area covered by the city police, the mayor isn't going to be worried unduly. His salary isn't dependent on public safety. Yes, he has to face the electorate, eventually, but this might occur in three or four years, and many, many other issues will be on the table at that time. The reaction of the market to failure is swift and deadly; in the public sector, uncertain, weak and postponed.

Schwartz claims that the law courts are too important to be left to private enterprise. Yes, law is the foundation, the society, of the economy, of just about everything. But food, too, is pretty important. If we didn't have this sustenance, we couldn't have private enterprise, or anything else for that matter. Does that mean that the government should take over the production of food or steel or anything else that is important for private enterprise? Hardly. Schwartz's contentions prove nothing.

All nations are presently in a state of anarchy with each other. A consistent non-anarchist would therefore have to advocate world government. Yet, this suggestion is not forthcoming from Schwartz. Indeed, the very opposite is the case. The last thing advocated by the objectivists (or any other rational person) is a take over of the world by the U.N. defence or the provision of justice. The anarchist position of objectivists is thus rationally incoherent.

Let us consider the right of secession. Do people have a right to secede? If we believe in the law of free association, as do libertarians -- you should not be compelled to associate with people you want to avoid-- then this is a basic right (Gordon, 1998, McGee, 1994). If Quebec doesn't want to associate with Canada, they should have the right to secede. If some little town in Quebec wants to secede from Quebec, they should also have that right. If one little city block in that town wants to secede from that town or that province or from Canada, they should have that right, too. But, that is precisely anarchy! That any one person should have the right to associate with whomever he wants, is equivalent to the anarchist position. This is not "subjective" or "whim-worship." Contrary to Schwartz, the law of free association is fully consistent with our basic principles. Ones, presumably, shared by both objectivists and libertarians. In advocating statism, Schwartz exposes himself as rejecting this bed-rock concept.

It is true that libertarianism consists of people who do not subscribe to these views. We are a movement with some heterogeneity of opinion, unlike the objectivists. A minority are anarchists, but most are limited state libertarians or minarchists or classical liberals. In order to be part of one movement, we have arrived, in effect, at a compromise. The anarchists wish to eliminate 100% of the state, and the minarchists wish to reduce it by, say, only 95%. The compromise is, let's get rid of the first 95% of government, and then we'll argue about the rest of it. Given that there is going to be a group, all of whose members do not share identical perspectives on everything, this seems very reasonable, not irrational whim-worship, muscle-mysticism or anything of



that sort, as claimed by Schwartz.

### **8. International defence**

Under this rubric, Schwartz compiles a list of statements by libertarians that are, let me concede, extreme. These are entirely accurate quotes, however:

“The United States is the century’s most war-like imperialist country in the world.”

“The Soviets have the only proper foreign policy.”

“Therefore, the United States should engage in unilateral disarmament down to police levels.”

Various libertarians have said these things at various times. Schwartz wrote in 1986. Thus these libertarian statements were all made before the end of the Cold War and apply to that epoch. However, far from all libertarians have agreed with them. These ideas have lost out in the libertarian market of ideas, but yes, some advocates of this perspective still believe them. If you are going to let people into the tent who agree on a non-aggression axiom and property rights, there will be some that take views that are problematic. I would not say that the Soviets are the best model of foreign policy. I like the Swiss model far better. Better than the Soviet and also better than that of the US. I would see the United States, ideally, as a gigantic Switzerland.

As for the most expansionist, it is not the United States, rather, the Nazis and the Soviets. What of unilateral disarmament? No minarchist would advocate it. The anarchists, of course, advocate unilateral disarmament. But only for governments, not people. And our premise is that people, organized through markets, could better defend themselves than can states, in their behalf.

There was a student protest against Vietnam at Fordham University. Most lefties had signs saying, “U.S. out of Vietnam.” The libertarians countered with “U.S. out of the Bronx.” Yes, anarchists advocate unilateral disarmament on the part of the United States government, but they would also look forward to and welcome competing defence agencies that would protect the U.S. from the Russians or the Martians or whoever is the enemy du jour.

No, the United States government is not completely innocent in foreign policy. It is guilty of supporting both right-wing and left-wing dictatorships. When you are hit by a firing squad, you don’t care, really, which one it is. Examples include the Shah, Somoza, Marcos, Diem. The United States has given foreign aid to support Marxist third world countries. The United States government has established many more foreign military bases than any other country in the world. The Soviets, but not the U.S. have been attacked on their own territory three times in the 20th century. This is not an excuse for the USSR, but we should keep these things in context, to use a word favoured by the Randians.

The best foreign policy is the one advocated by George Washington, in his Farewell Address, in which he warned of “entangling alliances” with Europeans. We should be “isolationist” in terms of soldiers, and

“internationalist” with regard to free trade.

### 9. Crime

Schwartz next attacks libertarianism on crime policy. Libertarians, but evidently not objectivists, are methodical individualists. This means that reality is interpreted in terms of the individuals because only they have reality, not groups. There is no such thing as a group, apart from the individuals who make it up. There is no group conscience, no group spirit, no group animus. Contrary to the socialists, and, apparently, the objectivists, the group is just a name for a bunch of individuals, and only the latter can be the building block of analysis. Thus no crime can ever be directed at a group apart from the individuals who comprise it.

Libertarians maintain that crime can only be interpreted as being against individuals. In the view of the objectivists, in contrast, crime is an attack on society. States Schwartz “Libertarians refuse to recognize the objective threat crime poses. They are blind to the effect of a criminal act upon all people. Such recognition would require an understanding of the role of thought in shaping action, of the peril to everyone created by the criminal’s unwillingness, as evidenced by his own actions, to acknowledge the existence of rights. It would require a comprehension of the meaning of principles in human life, of the dangers to a free and productive society, created by even a single act of crime. The society transmits the message to all potential criminals, that it will not vigorously prosecute and punish such acts.”

In the libertarian, if not the objectivist view, the pacifist has a right to forgive his aggressor. If I punch a pacifist in the nose, and a policeman sees this and seizes me, the pacifist can demand that I be let go. The pacifist can say, “Block only punched *me* in the nose; it’s MY nose, it’s my private property nose. It is not a social nose. Let my aggressor go.” In the libertarian view, he has the right to forgive me my crime.

In the socialist-objectivist perspective, in sharp contrast, mine was a crime against everyone. My particular victim can’t forgive me because my crime was an attack upon society as a whole, not just on him. But, this is clearly mistaken. Of course, if word got around that a person was a pacifist and keeps forgiving his attackers, his property and life might not be safe. This might impact a little jolt of reality to pacifists who are now protected from the error of their ways by our present socialized objectivist law. But that is a different issue.

Now consider compensation for victims under libertarianism. Is victim compensation the essence of punishment? In the U.S., if you commit a crime, they put you in jail. What does this mean? Three square meals a day, a warm comfy cell, TV, air conditioning. All this comes at taxpayer expense, which means at the victim’s expense. By the way, prisons were not always with us. Before that time, if you got caught stealing or violating person or property rights, you went on a chain gang or a punishment detail, the purpose of which was to create valuable goods and services to compensate your victim. Jails, in contrast, were created in order to enhance the role of the state in

society, and to reform the criminal. That is, to enable him to do penitence for his crime. That is why they place a Bible in every cell. But, this is unjust. First, the criminal violates the victim. Then, when caught, he is placed in jail, again at the victim's expense. This is to add insult to injury.

The model for punishment based on libertarian theory is based on "Two teeth for a tooth." Suppose that B steals \$100 from A. When he is forced to return this money, the first "tooth." The second part of the punishment consists of doing to B what he did to A, namely grabbing \$100 of his; the second tooth<sup>8</sup>.

In addition, the thief must make good for the costs of catching him which might well be far in excess of \$100. Further, when B stole the \$100, say, at the point of a gun, he frightened A. Whereas, when the forces of law and order mete out justice to B, he knows exactly what is going to happen. In order to balance the scales, a "scaring" penalty must be imposed on B. He must be made to play Russian roulette with live ammunition, with the percentage of bullets and chambers to be determined by the severity of the crime. So, it is not just *two teeth* for a tooth. It is this, plus the cost of capture and the scare penalty or the monetary equivalent of that, all at the victim's discretion. In contrast to present practice, this would be a serious impediment to criminality.

Could a rich criminal pay off his victim, instead of serving a sentence in jail at hard labor in order to pay off his debt? Yes, but only at a price acceptable to the victim. The Randians think of this as vicious, depraved and immoral. But, this, amazingly, is a Randian attack against the wealthy. Objectivists are supposed to be in favour of rich people, or at least opposed to singling them out for special obloquy. Why shouldn't millionaires be more able to buy their way out of crimes than the poor? If being rich does not enable a person to purchase more things of value, apart from being blatantly unjust, this removes an incentive for productivity and consumer satisfaction. Again, the Randians side with the socialists and egalitarians.

Of course this policy has to be carefully tailored for murder and rape. Broomsticks, however, go a long way toward a punishment solution for rapists. As for murder, how can retaliation be justly attained? If there were a machine that could transfer the life out of a live murderer and into his dead victim, using it would constitute quintessential justice. After all, the murderer stole a life from the man he killed, and, according to libertarian theory, he must be made to give it back. If men were like cats and had nine lives, the murderer would owe two of them, based on two teeth for a tooth theory, plus costs of capture, etc. In the present real world we do not have any such

---

<sup>8</sup> According to the Talmudic Mishpatim "Exodus" (paragraph 22, line 3): "(A thief) must make full restitution. If he does not have the means, he must be sold (as a slave to make restitution) for his theft. If the stolen article is found in his possession, ... he must make double restitution."

machine. But this example shows that the murderer's life is forfeit. It should be given to the heirs of the victim, to dispose of as they wish; e.g., enslavement, public execution with sale of seats to onlookers, etc.

Suppose the victim is threatened by friends of the perpetrator if he insists upon meting out justice in this manner. This objection can be addressed through restrictive covenants. Namely, the victim can make a prior deal with the local private police force to deal with the criminal in his behalf, so that punishment would no longer be up to him. Thus, he could not be threatened. It would have to be an institutional threat -- as at present.

Schwartz favours preventive detention for criminals. But this means, for people *likely* to engage in crime. For they had already engaged, say, in a robbery, and were apprehended, it would not be *preventative* detention, but rather plain old punishment. In the libertarian view, in contrast, a person is innocent until proven guilty<sup>9</sup>. Schwartz's view would support locking up all black male teenagers, the innocent along with the guilty, since this age, sex, race cohort is responsible for a disproportionate number of crimes.

#### **10. State criminality?**

Libertarians posit that if you initiate coercion against a non-aggressor, you are a criminal and you should be made to pay a penalty. Suppose a government court sentences an innocent man for a crime. This court is then guilty of initiating force against a non-aggressor. QED. The judge himself is a criminal. If we are going to be consistent with our principles, not wishy washy whim worshipping objectivists, we have to consider that court in violation of the law.

This very idea drives Schwartz apoplectic: "If an arresting officer realizes that he is going to charged with kidnapping if the suspect is eventually freed, one can be sure that few arrests will ever be made." Yes, such a policy will indeed make the police think twice before arresting people. Or, fire bombing their residences, as at Waco. They are first going to try to find out if they are truly dealing with criminals. None of this shooting first and asking questions thereafter. This policy follows from the non-aggression premises, and we libertarians are nothing if not logically consistent with our principles.

The burden of Schwartz's argument is that if we punish mistaken cops and judges, we will promote criminality. But, in the libertarian society, we will have far less crime in the first place than at present. First of all, everything would be privatized, there will be no public property<sup>10</sup>. There will be no public police, who I regard as a danger to all citizens because they have

---

<sup>9</sup> For more on the libertarian theory of crime and punishment, see Kinsella (1996, 1997), Rothbard (1982)

<sup>10</sup> This is true for the libertarian anarchist position. In the case of limited state libertarianism, the only public property would be that devoted to armies (to keep foreign bad guys off our backs), police (to do the same for local hoodlums) and courts (to determine who is who).

no economic incentive to stop crime. It would only be private police who can be fired if they err. In other words, the police will be as efficient as groceries and restaurants and hotels, where we now take this for granted. Not in the public streets and parks, where we have to worry about our safety.

Secondly, there will be no drug laws, nor any against pornography, prostitution, and other victimless “crimes.” There will be no welfare, which leads to family breakdown, which in turn, exacerbates crime. As a result, there will be a lot less crime and thus a lot less for police to do, except stop real criminals.

Thirdly, private cops will be more efficient than public ones, even though they would have to be more careful about apprehending innocent people. This is a *good* thing. They will try harder to arrest only the guilty. They will know if they engage in wrongful arrests, courts and juries (this applies to incarcerating the innocent) will have to take responsibility. If someone is found guilty who is later proven to be innocent, then all those involved are implicated in this crime of incarcerating an innocent person, e.g., kidnapping.

Why shouldn't *all* initiators of force, including cops and jurists and judges who punish innocents, be treated as criminals? The views of objectivists such as Schwartz on this matter are incompatible with their own supposed principles. They, too, presumably agree with the non-aggression axiom. But what is the incarceration of an innocent man but an invasive act? Further, the cops will pay a penalty for false arrest or break-ins or unjust incarcerations, but the crooks will not go free as at present. Just because a policeman obtains evidence illegitimately, doesn't mean that this illicit evidence can't be used against the robber. Both are punished. The crook, for his crime and the cop (far less, presumably) for his illegitimate behaviour.

### **11. Class Analysis**

Most people who are familiar with class analysis know only of the Marxist variety. In Marx's class analysis, it is the employer who is the ruler and the employee the ruled. This of course makes no sense economically or in any other way. However, what is wrong with Marxist class analysis is not the class analysis, but rather the Marxism.

Who comprises the ruling class and who the victims for libertarians? This is a crucial question. Because when and if the libertarians take over and justice is done, someone is going to go to jail for law violations. Consider the Nuremberg trials, only now applied to Cuba. On the one hand, the entire population cannot be considered guilty of the crime of imposing communism. All inhabitants are not guilty of criminal behavior. There are at least quite a few who are unwilling victims. On the other hand, it is not true that no one should be punished. We must have a theory to separate the guilty from the innocent.

In past centuries, sometimes when an enemy vessel was captured, the officers were either shot or incarcerated or exchanged and the enlisted men were incorporated (e.g. drafted) into the victorious navy. This was done in part

on the grounds that the enlisted men were innocent victims and the officers were, in effect, the ruling class. It is that kind of a distinction we are seeking. These are just rough and ready categories to apply to the civilian world, but there has to be a similar distinction made if we're going to have neither zero nor all Cubans go to jail to be punished for their crimes. The idea is that it is the leaders not the followers who are guilty, it is the head bureaucrat, not the clerk. In the typical communist country, everyone works for the state, so this could hardly be the criterion for guilt. Everyone uses the public roads even in relatively free countries, so this cannot be our litmus test either. Not all recipients of welfare are guilty of being in the ruling class; indeed, it would be the rare one who is. Not all borrowers of books from the public library, not all students at public schools, not all users of the mail system are guilty in this regard. Rather, most such people are the under class. They are getting their own money back in many cases, or, in the case of some libertarians (e.g., Ragnar Danneskjold in *Atlas Shrugged*) are actively engaged in relieving a thief of his ill gotten gains. But, businesses that push for subsidies, top bureaucrats who promote statism, leading politicians, those in charge of the command posts of society, the highest ranking media people who offer apologetics for governmental excesses, the universities, statist intellectuals, these are the kinds of people that will have to be looked upon very thoroughly to see if they were in the ruling class or not.

In Rand's view, in contrast, business is America's "most persecuted minority." This is indeed true in some cases. But in other cases, they are, in the words of that great Canadian libertarian Tommy Douglas, "corporate welfare bums".

## **12. Land Reform**

How does the libertarian deal with stolen property? Obviously, it must be returned. It is that simple. But, suppose the theft took place a long time ago. Suppose that your great grandfather took a ring from my great-grandfather. Through the succession of inheritance, you got the ring. You are, of course, not guilty of a crime. You didn't steal anything. But, you are still the holder of stolen property. Justice surely consists of making you disgorge the ring and give it back to me, since I would have inherited it. Is there a statute of limitations? No. There is no statute of limitations on justice. Justice is the highest goal in the legal realm. When a law, such as a statute of limitations conflicts with one of our basic axioms, it must be jettisoned. So, if the theft took place three hundred years ago, and I can prove that you have my ring, it should be handed over from you to me.

This has very important implications not so much for rings, but for Japanese-Canadians, aboriginals, the children of the black slaves, Mexican-Americans, people in Central America, Africa, and Israel. In some of these cases, there has been land stolen many, many years ago, which is now in the hands of the children of the thieves. While this aspect of libertarian theory sounds very radical, in practice it is less so. This is because the claimant always needs proof. Possession is nine tenths of the law, and to overcome the

presumption that property is now in the hands of its rightful owners requires that an evidentiary burden be overcome. The further back in history was the initial act of aggression (not only because written evidence is less likely to be available), the less likely it is that there can be proof of it. So, certain thefts will have to escape the libertarian passion for justice, because time places a veil over these past events. But, the ideal is clear: If there is stolen property and it can be proved that it was stolen, it should be returned.

Schwartz, along with most conservatives and many others as well, is very contemptuous of this idea. He calls land reform a variety of socialism. It cannot be denied that there is indeed a socialist version of land reform. Here, the authorities transfer land from the rich to the poor for that reason and that reason alone. Obviously, that has nothing to do with libertarianism. It is just moral drivel. But, taking from the thieves, or the children of the thieves, and giving to the children of the victims, that is not socialistic pap; that is consonant with libertarianism. Consider the latifundia in Central America, in South America, in Asia and Africa. The conquistadores came in and stole the land hundreds of years ago, and the peasants are now trying to get it back. The socialists support them on the grounds that the latifundistas are rich and the peasants are poor. Conservatives oppose this because they claim this is a violation of private property rights. However, on this basis one could actually support slavery, based on the existence of a bill of sale. The native peoples see the socialists as (paradoxically) upholding justice in property titles (for improper egalitarian reasons), while the supposed capitalists (conservatives such as Schwartz) are against them. As a result, they become socialists. I would become a socialist too if socialism protected private property rights, while capitalism did not<sup>11</sup>.

### 13. Student rebels

In her “Cashing In: the Student Rebellion”, Ayn Rand opposed the student takeover of universities at Berkeley, Columbia, Kent State, and elsewhere. The rebels were mainly Marxists. There marched under the flags of Marx, Che Guevara, etc. Rand (and many other conservatives) was vitriolic in her hatred for this movement. For her, this was an attack on all that is good and proper. She wrote exactly as if this was private property these students were taking over. But it wasn’t private property. Many were state universities. Others, such as Columbia and Harvard were supposedly private, but a significant part of their budgets were met, not by private individuals, but by the state. Thus, this was not an attack on private property, rather on *state* property. If they were attacking private property, then everything that Ayn Rand said would be compatible with libertarianism. But they were not. Even though they were Marxists, they were still attacking *public* property.

What does Schwartz have to say about this? “Government property is always and everywhere fair game for the libertarians. For the libertarian must

---

<sup>11</sup> For more on libertarian land reform, see Block and Yeatts (1999-2000), Block (1999b), D. Friedman, et. al. (1985, pp. 495-510), Rothbard (1982, pp. 51-68)

rejoice every time any piece of governmental and therefore stolen property is returned by any means necessary to the private sector.” But, what is wrong with that? Don’t objectivists, too, favour the return of stolen property? Schwartz then attempts a reductio: anyone who receives a government check or travels on a government road or uses a government library is now fair game for libertarian goon squads. No, not everybody. Only ruling class members who do that. And not because they use government roads but because they are in the ruling class. Does Schwartz believe that *no one* is guilty of what the U. S. government is now doing? That a libertarian Nuremberg trial in the U. S. would find not a single guilty person? This, evidently, is his position. It is an untenable one.

Ragnar Danneskjold in *Atlas Shrugged* (Rand, 1957) attacked government relief ships that were stealing the property of people like Hank Reardon, and giving it to socialists in Europe, South America, etc.; e.g., this was a welfare system, international style. Ragnar was attacking government property and was properly considered a hero. This shows that Rand was not logically consistent. In *Atlas Shrugged*, she was a libertarian and advocated returning stolen property. But in “Cashing in the Student Rebellion,” she forgot to check her premises.

Further, Schwartz is particularly vitriolic about libertarians blowing up things. I know of no libertarians who have ever done that or anything like it, but what about Howard Roark of the Fountainhead? He blew up a building! Rand’s novels are very libertarian, but her non-fiction is not. Schwartz, unfortunately, follows the latter. Both of them have difficulty distinguishing between public and private property; surely one of the bedrock principles of libertarianism.

#### **14. Kid Lib**

Do libertarians improperly support the North American Man Boy Love Association (NAMBLA)? Let us consider the libertarian theory of children and children’s rights<sup>12</sup>. There are two issues which must be addressed: what is the dividing line between children and adults, and what legal requirements may legitimately be imposed on parents in their dealings with their children as regards NAMBLA.

Libertarianism could well be defined based on the motto, “anything goes as long as there is no coercion”, or “anything between consenting adults.” Legitimate are any acts between consenting adults, emphasis both on the “consenting,” and on “adults”.

But what is an adult? In most countries, there is a legislated age of consent which ranges anywhere from twenty-one down to eighteen to sixteen, even to fourteen. That is quite a range. The problem with legislated age of

---

<sup>12</sup> Rothbard (1972, pp. 8-10; 1982, chapter 14, “Children and Rights,” pp. 97-112); Evers (1978a, 1978b); Block (1991, “The Employer of Child Labor,” pp. 247-256, 1999A); Kauffman (1992), Whitehead and Block (2001, forthcoming);



consent law is that it is irrational and collectivist. It assumes for example that all sixteen year olds are alike. But, the maturity range of sixteen year olds varies widely. Some are silly children while others are very intelligent adults. (The same could be said for people of age forty-five.) It is a collectivist law because it treats all people the same regardless of their individual qualities. It just looks at their calendar age, which is really not the essence of adulthood.

In contrast, libertarians have a theory of adulthood. It harkens back to homesteading, not to the land, but to the person himself. You are an adult when you homestead yourself. How can you homestead yourself when you are a kid? You leave home, and become self-supporting. For children below the age of consent, however, this would of course have to be done under court supervision; undoubtedly, any private court worth its salt would impose a cooling off or waiting period. You establish yourself as an adult. You seize control over your own body by setting up shop for yourself. You have the right to do just that. The implication is that PINS (Persons in Need of Supervision) laws are illegitimate. We should not put in jail young people who have established their adulthood for crimes that if an adult did them, he would remain free. For example, running away from home or contracting with an adoption agency, or being truant from school. It should be a kid's right to get away from abusive parents. When you homestead yourself, when you run away, when you contract with another adult to take care of you, then you are on your own. This is in effect secession from one's parents.

But this would occur in only the most exceptional of cases. In more ordinary circumstances, libertarians join the view of the populace at large that statutory age limits are reasonable aspects of the law. Yes, they are arbitrary; yes, they will mis-categorize some children as well as adults.

Consider a boy aged seventeen or over, where this is the statutory cut off point between adults and children. The very idea of him joining the North American Man Boy Love Association, and engaging in sex acts with adult men, is personally repulsive to me. But as a libertarian, I have to realize that only coercive acts against such a youngster should be punishable. Not non-coercive ones. If a seventeen year old is an adult, and voluntarily wants to have sex with an adult homosexual man, I may not like it. I may be revolted by it. But, gays, too, have rights. They should not be put in jail for consensual behaviour with adults of a young age<sup>13</sup>.

What of the rare and exceptional under aged child who wins adult status through a court? Before such a person could engage in legal sexual relations with an adult (whether homo or heterosexual) he must be considered an adult in order to do so, he must be mature enough to set up a home for himself, and this must be approved of by a judge. But, once all of this is attained, then an adult of any age (e.g. an exceptional child of any age) may

---

<sup>13</sup> The exact same situation should obtain for heterosexuals. That is, it should be legal for a 17 year old girl to engage in sexual relations with a male of any age, given this cut off point.

engage in sexual relations with anyone he wishes.

Suppose, now, with an age of consent law of seventeen years old, which we for argument's sake stipulate as legitimate, a NAMBLA member accosts a four year old boy. As far as I am concerned, this should be considered illegal. Any parent who allows this to happen should be found guilty of child abuse, which implies not only losing charge of his son, but also a jail sentence. However, there is one exception to this rule. This, presumably, will drive Schwartz to apoplexy, but I persevere nonetheless.

Suppose that there is a starvation situation, and the parent of the four year old child (who is not an adult) does not have enough money to keep him alive. A wealthy NAMBLA man offers this parent enough money to keep him and his family alive – if he will consent to his having sex with the child. We assume, further, that this is the *only* way to preserve the life of this four year old boy. Would it be criminal child abuse for the parent to accept this offer?

Not on libertarian grounds. For surely it is better for the child to be a live victim of sexual abuse rather than unsullied and dead. Rather, it is the parent who consents to the death of his child, when he could have kept him alive by such extreme measures, who is the real abuser<sup>14</sup>.

### **15. Defending the Undefendable**

Schwartz is not a big fan of my own book, *Defending the Undefendable*. He states: “Who qualifies for Block’s accolades? Only the dregs of society. They are applauded not in spite of their worthlessness, but because of it. It is because they are regarded as scum that Block wants to elevate them to respectability in order to debase the very idea of respectability. All of these people, the pornos and the pimps and the prostitutes. All of them are paragons of virtue to Block. Why? Because they have all rejected standards of behaviour, not in favour of different better standards, but in the name of the annihilation of standards. All of these reprobates choose to climb down into the slime. They do not uphold some new ethical criteria by which they claim that their lives are noble. They simply announce that they relish slime. An affinity for filth, Block maintains is ennobling.”

In the last paragraph of my introduction to Block (1991) I say, “The defence of such as the prostitute, the pornographer, etc., is thus a very limited one. It consists solely of the claim that they do not initiate physical violence against non-aggressors. Hence, according to libertarian principles, none should be visited upon them. This means only that these activities should not be punished by jail sentences or other forms of violence. It decidedly does not mean that these activities are moral, proper or good.”

It is thus a very limited defence of these people that I am offering. I am not saying they are great. I am certainly not attacking standards. People can repudiate pimps, prostitutes, etc, all they want. Just keep your (physically invasive) mitts off of them because they are not guilty of any initiation of force. This attack of Schwartz’s is particularly puzzling in view of this

---

<sup>14</sup> For the distinction between libertarians and libertines, see Block (1994).

statement of his, “The ideology of capitalism unquestionably opposes all acts of even uncoercive irrationality such as racism or heroin pushing even as it recognizes the political right to engage in them.” So, really, Schwartz agrees with me. Yet, he bitterly attacks me. Perhaps, he did not read the introduction to this book.

### **16. Collectivism**

Rand’s (1957) fictional hero John Galt states: “I swear by my life and by my love of it, that I will never live for the sake of another man nor ask another man to live for the sake of mine.” How does this fit in with libertarianism? It is not aggressive. It is not a threat. Thus, according to libertarianism, Galt should not be put in jail for any action of this sort.

Contrast this with a famous saying of Karl Marx. “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” As long as this is done on a voluntary basis, it too, is acceptable under proper law (remember, if we can have voluntary Naziism, we can certainly have voluntary collectivism). If we implement this rule, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need” on a voluntary basis, this too is legitimate in the libertarian view. There is nothing wrong with voluntary socialism. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with a commune, a nunnery, a collective, a kibbutz, a Hutterite community, with even the average American family.

At one time, I had a six year old daughter who ate according to her need, not in accordance with her ability to earn income<sup>15</sup>. We had a little socialist commune at home. Is this unlibertarian? No. It is voluntary. But, it is certainly incompatible with Galt’s statement<sup>16</sup>. However, they are *both* compatible with libertarianism. Yet, for Schwartz, collectivism is the most heinous of evils. I maintain, in contrast, that there is nothing wrong with collectivism except the coercion that oft-time accompanies it<sup>17</sup>. Collectivism in and of itself, is for the libertarian, a neutral term. Some libertarians, perhaps, won’t like it. They won’t engage in family behaviour or communes or collectives or kibbutzim and will not join the Hutterites.

### **17. Strategy**

According to Schwartz, the libertarian strategy consists of mindless force, repudiation of values and whim worship. Objectivists are especially critical of united fronts. They claim that libertarianism constitutes just such an organization. Namely, it is a group of people who agree on but limited goals.

He is correct on this. Libertarians want only one thing: the upholding

---

<sup>15</sup> She is now 22 years old, and still has no respect.

<sup>16</sup> That is, my wife and I both live for the sake of our kids, in the sense that we would sacrifice all of our possessions to ensure their safety.

<sup>17</sup> For a philosophical error similar to the one made by Schwartz (1986) -- e.g., conflating collectivism with coercion, see Bethell (1998). For a correction to the latter, see Block (1999B).

of property rights (to both persons and physical objects). In contrast, objectivism stands for far more. Schwartz constructs the following analogy: Suppose that there is this group called Health Forces and it consists of herbalists, registered doctors, faith healers, voodooists, and Christian scientists. He charges that this akin to libertarianism because we include in our numbers gays, feminists, atheists, Christians, Jews, anarchists, minarchists, advocates of both the PLO and Israel, those who favor drugs, prostitution, gambling, and pornography, and those who oppose these things. Compared to Randians, who agree with each other on just about everything<sup>18</sup>, libertarians are indeed a group of very heterogeneous thinkers.

But, there is a disanalogy between libertarians and “Health Forces.” Members of the former do agree with one other on our two major axioms, namely non-aggression and property rights. We are not in accord with regard to how that premise is to be justified. The starting point is indeed controversial within libertarian circles; but, by definition, we must all support these axioms as they are defining characteristics of our philosophy. The proper analogy with health would not be people who do not even agree with each other on health issues because libertarians are all in accordance on non-aggression. The proper analogy would be with any one medical school of thought. All such doctors agree on what good health is and how to attain it, but they may well not all be of the same opinion as to why health is good or what are the tradeoffs between it and the enjoyment of cigarettes. Thus there is nothing irrational about libertarianism.

Schwartz criticizes united fronts on the ground that: “Libertarianism can not convince anyone of the evil of taxation or censorship.” This is ludicrous. Libertarianism is a vastly expanding movement at least compared to Objectivism, a tiny imploding cult. One of the proofs of this contention is that he is giving us sanction by writing his critique. If we were not seen as a threat, as something bigger than his group, this would not have been written.

In the good old days of Rand’s ascendancy, libertarians were dismissed out of hand. Not any more, it would appear. I therefore thank Schwartz for writing his critique of this philosophy. It certainly did give us an opportunity to examine and explicate libertarianism in a way we might not otherwise have done. Schwartz helps keep us on our toes. His vitriol is unfortunate, but I suppose it goes with the nature of the beast.

### References

Benson, Bruce L. 1989. “Enforcement of private property rights in primitive societies: Law without government.” *Journal of Libertarian Studies* 9, no. 1 (Winter): 1–26.

---

<sup>18</sup> This statement applies to the days before the split into two Randian groups. Even now, there is virtual unanimity of opinion within each of these two groups. The only Randian institution which allows for debate amongst its members is *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*, which is affiliated with neither group.

Benson, Bruce L. 1990. *The Enterprise of Law: Justice Without the State*. San Francisco: Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy.

Bergland, David, A Review of Schwartz's "Libertarianism a perversion of liberty", *American Libertarian*, October 1986.

Bethell, Tom, *The Noblest Triumph: Property and Prosperity Through the Ages*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998

Bidinotto, Robert, "David and Leviathan," a book review of Boaz (1997), *IOS Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 4, April 1997

Block, Walter, *Defending the Undefendable*, New York: Fox and Wilkes, 1976, 1991

Block Walter, "Voluntary Slavery," *Libertarian Connection*, 1968

Block, Walter, "Libertarianism vs. Libertinism," *The Journal of Libertarian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 1994, pp. 117-128

Block, Walter, "A Libertarian Theory of Immigration," *Journal of Libertarian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2, Summer 1998, pp. 167-186

Block, Walter, "Market Inalienability Once Again: Reply to Radin," *Thomas Jefferson Law Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Fall 1999a, pp. 37-88.

Block, Walter, "Review Essay of Bethell, Tom, *The Noblest Triumph: Property and Prosperity Through the Ages*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998," in *The Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Fall 1999b, pp. 65-84

Block, Walter and Guillermo Yeatts, "The Economics and Ethics of Land Reform: A Critique of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace's 'Toward a Better Distribution of Land: The Challenge of Agrarian Reform,'" *Journal of Natural Resources and Environmental Law*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1999-2000, pp. 37-69

Block, Walter, "Toward a Libertarian Theory of Inalienability: A Critique of Rothbard, Barnett, Gordon, Smith, Kinsella and Epstein," *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, forthcoming

Branden, Barbara, *The Passion of Ayn Rand* (New York: Doubleday, 1986)

Friedman, Milton -- Block, Walter, Letters, unpublished, 1999

Evers, Williamson M., 1978b, "Rawls and children," *The Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Summer, pp. 109-114

Evers, Williamson M., 1978a, "The law of omissions and neglect of children," *The Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Winter, pp. 1-10

Friedman, David, Milton Friedman, Walter Block, Philip Wogaman, Kenneth Boulding, Walter Berns, Edmund Opitz, Paul Heyne and Geoffrey Brennan, Discussion, in *Morality of the Market: Religious and Economic Perspectives*, Walter Block, Geoffrey Brennan & Kenneth Elzinga eds., Fraser Institute: Vancouver, 1985, pp. 495- 510

Gordon, David, ed., *Secession, State and Liberty*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1998

Hoppe, Hans-Hermann, *A Theory of Socialism and Capitalism: Economics, Politics and Ethics*, Boston: Kluwer, 1989

Hoppe, Hans-Hermann, *The Economics and Ethics of Private Property: Studies in Political Economy and Philosophy*, Boston: Kluwer, 1993

Kauffman, Bill, 1992, "The Child Labor Amendment Debate of the 1920's; or, Catholics and Mugwumps and Farmers," *The Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2, Fall, pp. 139-170

Kinsella, Stephan N., "Punishment and Proportionality: The Estoppel Approach," 12:1 *J. Libertarian Studies* 51 (Spring 1996)

Kinsella, Stephan N., "A Libertarian Theory of Punishment and Rights," (volume) 30 *Loy. L.A. L. Rev.* 607-45 (1997)

McGee, Robert W., 1994, "Secession Reconsidered," *The Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Fall, pp. 11-33

Miller, Vincent and Bruce Evoy, "Libertarians and the objectivists; a reply to the intellectual activist attack on libertarianism" (Richmond, VA: Libertarian International, 1987)

Rand, Ayn, *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, Signet, 1982.

Rand, Ayn, *Atlas Shrugged*, Random House, 1957.

Rand, Ayn, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, New American Library, 1964.

Rand, Ayn, ed., *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, Signet, 1967

Rothbard, Murray N., *The Ethics of Liberty*, New York: New York University Press, 1998 (1982).

Rothbard, Murray N., *For a New Liberty*, Macmillan, New York, 1973

Rothbard, Murray N., "Kid Lib." *Outlook*. December 1972, pp. 8-10.

Spooner, Lysander, *No Treason*, Larkspur, Colorado, (1870) 1966.

Schwartz, Peter, "Libertarianism: the Perversion of Liberty," New York: The Intellectual Activist, 1986; a condensed version of this work appeared in Ayn Rand, *The Voice of Reason: Essays in Objectivist Theory*, Leonard Peikoff, ed., N.Y.: New American Library, 1988, pp 311-333.

Whitehead, Roy and Walter Block, "Direct Payment of State Scholarship Funds to Church-Related Colleges Offends the Constitution and Title VI," *Brigham Young University Journal of Public Law*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2000, pp. 191-207

Whitehead, Roy and Walter Block, "The Boy Scouts, Freedom of Association and the Right to Discriminate: A Legal, Philosophical and Economic Analysis," *Whittier Law Review*, forthcoming.

## Tara Smith's *Viable Values: A Study of Life as the Root and Reward of Morality*: A Discussion

Irfan Khawaja

### I. Introduction

Tara Smith's *Viable Values* is a valuable addition (so to speak) to a newly-emerging literature on the philosophical thought of Ayn Rand. Its contribution, as I see it, is two-fold. On the one hand, it lays out the essential features of Ayn Rand's Objectivist Ethics in a clear and persuasive way; on the other hand, it presents a series of bold challenges, both direct and indirect, to a good deal of mainstream ethical theorizing in the "analytic" tradition.<sup>1</sup> The book as a whole adds up nicely to the sum of these parts.

Though there is much to say about virtually every section of the book, I'll confine myself here to discussion of four issues: questions of method; the conditionality of life as the basis of moral value; the content of moral prescriptions as egoistic rather than impersonal; and the conditional (as opposed to categorical) force of moral obligation. These four issues are central both to Smith's project and to Ayn Rand's distinctive ethical vision; they also mark a faultline that distinguishes the Objectivist conception of ethics from that of the mainstream. Focusing on them, I think, should bring into sharp relief the issues that divide Objectivism from mainstream ethical thought.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> I use the term "mainstream" throughout to denote "the currently dominant mode of philosophical research and inquiry in the United States according to its avowed practitioners." As John Searle puts it, "The dominant mode of philosophizing in the United States is called analytic philosophy. Without exception, the best philosophy departments in the United States are dominated by analytic philosophers, and among the leading philosophers in the United States, all but a tiny handful would be classified as analytic philosophers....Analytic philosophy has never been fixed or stable, because it is intrinsically self-critical and its practitioners are always challenging their presuppositions and conclusions." John Searle, "Contemporary Philosophy in the United States," in *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy*, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), edited by Nicholas Bunnin and E.P. Tsui-James, pp. 1-2. See also Bernard Williams, "Contemporary Philosophy: A Second Look," in the same volume, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> "Objectivism" is the name Ayn Rand gave to her philosophy as a whole. Given Smith's claim to offer an elaboration and defense of Rand's account (*IV*, p. 83), it follows trivially (I think) that her book is a defense of the Objectivist Ethics. In saying this, I don't mean to imply that Smith is an official spokesperson for Objectivism, or that her book (or this paper) represent "official doctrine."

Reason Papers 26 (Summer 2000): 63-88. Copyright © 2000

## II. Questions of Method

*Viable Values* begins with the age-old question, “Why should I be moral?” and with a provocative discussion of the failure of mainstream approaches to the question (*IV*, ch. 2). (For ease of reference, let’s call this *the Question*.) One of the unique features of her account, Smith says, is success at answering the Question where other theories have failed (*IV*, pp. 83, 187). Given the centrality of the Question to the book, it would be useful to know exactly what the Question is asking, and why it assumes such significance in the first place.

As many philosophers have noted, the Question “Why should I be moral?” is highly ambiguous; in fact, philosophers have often dismissed the question for just that reason. Smith ably refutes the most important of these criticisms (*IV*, pp. 16-28), but doesn’t in my view dwell at sufficient length on Rand’s unique way of posing the Question. In the first few paragraphs of her essay “The Objectivist Ethics,” Rand phrases her opening question as follows: The first question that has to be answered, as a precondition of any attempt to define, to judge or to accept any specific system of ethics, is: *Why* does man need a code of values?

Let me stress this. The first question is not: What particular code of values should man accept? The first question is: Does man need values at all—and why?<sup>3</sup>

Depending on how one counts them, there are anywhere between three and six questions here, each significantly different from (and more precise than) those typically discussed in the mainstream literature. They are:

1. *Do* we need to value? If so, why?
2. Given answers to (1) and (2), why do we need a *code* of values (and what is a “code of values”)?
3. Given affirmative answers to (1) and (2), *which* code of values do we need?

I’ll return to the answers to these questions in the next section. For now, I want to pause on three features of Rand’s method that distinguish it from contemporary analytic approaches to ethics, and which inform Smith’s method as well (*IV*, pp. 13-19).

First, note Rand’s emphasis on the proper formulation of the question that motivates ethical theorizing: we can’t, according to her, embark on ethical inquiry until we’re clear about the question that states its goal. Nor will just

---

In the space at my disposal, I’ve had to give a very compressed account of Smith’s argument; I’ve also felt free to move back and forth between Smith’s book and Rand’s original claims, without (I hope) distorting the content of either.

<sup>3</sup> Ayn Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism*, (New York: Signet Books, 1964), pp. 13-14, italics in original.



any idiosyncratic question do. Only the right question gets you the right answer, and only the right answer so conceived will produce moral knowledge.

Secondly, note the insistence that the questions be posed and answered in a specific sequence. We're to begin with the most fundamental justificatory questions about value as such, questions that make no specifically *moral* presuppositions (questions 1 above). We then answer each of these morally-neutral questions before moving to derivative questions about the content of morality, taking the answers to the fundamental questions to be the basis for inquiry into the derivative ones. The result, if successful, should be an ethical theory with a foundationalist structure in which a basic normative principle(s) serves to support a superstructure of derivative ethical prescriptions.

Finally—and as a consequence of the preceding two points—note that the method as a whole forbids circularity and question-begging in ethical argument. Beginning with a morally neutral starting point rules out the assumption that our “considered moral beliefs” embody moral knowledge, and that the task of ethical theorizing is simply to “account” for these beliefs by appealing to higher-order principles. As Smith aptly puts it, the latter procedure merely allows one to seek “a rationalization for one’s existing beliefs rather than a justification of true beliefs” (*IV*, p. 15).

All of this flies in the face of received wisdom about method in analytic philosophy. As Dale Jamieson puts it, These days some version of coherentism is the dominant view of what constitutes proper method for theory construction in ethics. Coherentism can be roughly characterized as the view that beliefs can be justified only by their relation to other beliefs.

The most influential form of coherentism is Rawls’s method of reflective equilibrium. According to Rawls, proper method involves beginning with a set of considered beliefs, formulating general principles to account for them, and then revising both principles and beliefs in the light of each other, until an equilibrium is reached.<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, on this view, none of Rand’s methodological precepts applies. For the reflective equilibrium theorist, no specific question provides the goal of ethical inquiry; any question will do, and the questions can be posed and answered in any order, or in no particular order at all. Consequently, reflective equilibrium encourages rather than proscribes circular reasoning; in fact, circularity may well be the only stable and determinate feature of the method.

---

<sup>4</sup> Dale Jamieson, “Method and Moral Theory,” p. 482 in *A Companion to Ethics*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1993), edited by Peter Singer.

I think we can see the merits of Rand's approach to ethics if we compare the two methods' prospects for producing moral knowledge. Rand defines knowledge as "a mental grasp of a fact(s) of reality, reached either by perceptual observation or by a process of reason based on perceptual observation."<sup>5</sup> On the mainstream view, knowledge is justified true belief with a proviso for handling so-called Gettier cases; alternatively, knowledge can be characterized as true belief that non-accidentally links truth and belief (as in Nozick's "truth-tracking" conception). On any plausible account, "knowledge" is a success term denoting a specific cognitive relationship between minds and truth, with truth conceived as correspondence to a mind-independent reality. What goes for knowledge generally goes for moral knowledge as well: moral knowledge is moral belief related in the right way to moral reality, where "moral reality" is discovered rather than constituted by mental activity.

By this standard, Rand's method does quite well. If we assume that question (1) is a legitimate and important question—an assumption that Smith indirectly defends (*IV*, pp. 16-28)—and we offer a genuinely responsive answer to that question (as Smith does, *IV* ch. 4), then if the answers are true, the result is a true foundation for moral knowledge, capable of transmitting truth to subsidiary principles via the answers to the subsidiary questions. It's a separate issue whether the resulting structure will provide the *whole* truth about moral reality, but it seems inarguable that it will constitute some important part of it by the very nature of the questions involved.

By contrast, reflective equilibrium does poorly by this standard, for three related reasons. For one thing, insofar as reflective equilibrium is coherentist, and coherentism countenances (or requires) circular reasoning, any theory based on reflective equilibrium will be circular. But if circularity is a fallacy, then all such theories will be fallacious—and no fallacious theory can count as knowledge.

Second, even if we waive the first objection, the method turns out to be vacuous. Reflective equilibrium tells us to achieve a coherentist "equilibrium" between our theoretical and pre-theoretical beliefs. But the method gives us (a) no determinate account of the criteria for "equilibrium," and (b) no actual method for achieving equilibrium, however we understand it.

Consider (a). "Equilibrium" is presumably a species of coherence. Unfortunately, it's unclear what species of coherence it is, because it's unclear what the genus "coherence" denotes. On the weakest interpretation, a coherent belief-set is one that is free of contradiction; on a stronger interpretation, every belief in such a belief-set entails every other. The difference between the two interpretations is stark, but the method gives us no way of discriminating between them. Since it doesn't, it neither gives us a determinate goal at which

---

<sup>5</sup> Ayn Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (New York: Meridian Books, 1990), p. 35.

to aim nor determinate prescriptions by which to achieve its aims. *A fortiori*, it gives us no goal or methods conducive to moral knowledge.

Now consider (b). The method of reflective equilibrium tells us to fit our pre-theoretical to our theoretical beliefs. The distinction between the two sorts of belief is obscure enough, but since the method offers no weighting of the one sort of belief to the other, the prescription turns out to be meaningless in any case: two agents starting with identical belief-sets could well follow the method but arrive at diametrically opposed belief-sets by following radically different procedures. Imagine that Abdul and Bilal begin with the same beliefs, both adopting the method of reflective equilibrium. Abdul brings his beliefs into equilibrium by taking a highly anti-theoretical strategy, keeping only his pre-theoretical beliefs and driving out all of his theoretical ones; Bilal does the reverse. By the terms of the method, neither Abdul nor Bilal has done anything wrong—even though each has done the reverse of what the other has done, and each has come to the reverse conclusions as the other has reached. This result seems to suggest that reflective equilibrium is less a “method” of ethical theorizing than the absence of one. For while we could describe both Abdul and Bilal as “following the method of reflective equilibrium,” we could with equal accuracy and greater simplicity describe them both as merely following their whims. A method this contentless hardly deserves the name.

Finally, even if we take the most charitable attitude toward the method, and waive the first two problems entirely, we’re still left with the fact that the method aims at no more than coherence. But coherence is a relation between beliefs, while knowledge is a relation between beliefs and a world that exists independently of beliefs. If so, the professed goal of the theory is irrelevant at best (and orthogonal at worst) to the goal of cognition, viz., knowledge. After all, if we begin with nothing but considered beliefs that are false, and merely put them into reflective equilibrium, we still end up with false beliefs, however elegantly expressed. Indeed, the very elegance of their expression might divert us even farther from moral knowledge than we might otherwise have been, since false beliefs elegantly presented are bound to attract us more than false beliefs without such theoretical embellishments.

So much for “theoretical” objections to reflective equilibrium. In practice, I think, the difference between Rand’s method and reflective equilibrium comes down to a difference between epistemic radicalism and conservatism. As we’ll see, Rand’s (and Smith’s) ethical views are quite radical, calling into question any number of commonplace assumptions about the status and content of morality. As Smith puts it:

The fact that certain moral conventions have been long or widely accepted carries no guarantee that they can withstand rational scrutiny. In order to arrive at a sound defense of morality, all prior suppositions about morality’s authority must be on the table. Any reader unwilling to suspend such suppositions is warned: Continued reading will be a waste of time. (*IV*, p. 15).

Reflective equilibrium, by contrast, encourages the complacent assumption that “we” already “have” moral knowledge, and that the task is simply to put it all in order. If the Rand-Smith argument is right, however, this assumption is wildly false. So let’s proceed now to the argument.

### III. The Foundation: The Conditionality of Life

Let’s revisit the questions posed at the beginning of section II, and consider the Objectivist answers to them in turn. Question (1) was: Do humans *need* to value? Is there anything that entities like us *have* to do? As a placeholder for the notion of “value,” we can think of a value, as Rand does, as “that which one acts to gain and/or keep.” A “value,” in other words, is the object or goal of an action.

At first glance, our question may seem to drive us to a paradox. Start with the assumption that we have free will in the full, libertarian sense of that term. Free will, in turn, implies a power for alternate possibilities. “A course of thought or action is ‘free,’” writes Leonard Peikoff, “if it is selected from two or more courses of action possible under the circumstances. In such a case, the difference is made by the individual’s decision, which did not have to be what it is, i.e., which could have been otherwise.”<sup>6</sup> The apparent paradox is this: on the one hand, moral obligation entails that I “have” to do what is moral, but on the other hand, if we have free will, and free will entails a power to select between alternate possibilities, there seems no sense in which I *have* to do anything.

An answer to Question (1) must resolve this apparent paradox. It must, in other words, identify an objective constraint on action—i.e., a principle about what we *have* to do—that is compatible with free will on a libertarian (rather than soft-determinist) interpretation.<sup>7</sup> To put the point another way, an answer to Question (1) must identify a source of *practical necessitation consistent with metaphysical freedom*. To be free is to have alternatives; to value is to seek an object; to be obliged is to be required to act in a specific way for specific objects. What we need is a principle that preserves our freedom, while showing how we can be required to rank some alternatives over others.

The principle in question is what we might call *the principle of conditional necessity*. The first part of the principle governs the *causation* of

---

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, (New York: Dutton, 1991), p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> By “soft determinist,” of course, I mean “compatibilist,” but introducing the term in this context would only have created confusion. “Compatibilists” in analytic jargon take freedom to be compatible with determinism; by contrast, the compatibility I have in mind in the text is one between moral obligation and a *non-deterministic* form of freedom.

action. To be free is to be able to choose between alternative courses of action, or alternative ends. If I will a given end, the nature of goal-directed action implies that only some actions within the range of possibilities will qualify as effective means for achieving the end. Since the end can't achieve itself, it follows that insofar as I regard the end as my goal, I must take the most effective of the available means to it. Contrapositively, if I refuse to will the means, I must give up the end.

The second part of the principle governs the *consequences* of actions. In opening up alternatives, freedom makes me an agent: I initiate actions by breaking the chain of prior determinants affecting me. My action, in turn, has two aspects—one volitional or internal, the other existential or external, including causal consequences in the physical world and moral consequences on my character. An action that I initiate is irreducibly *mine*; it is my unique causal contribution to the world, brought into the world by my agency. Whatever action I take, then, I must be able to endorse my actions *as mine*, acknowledging my having caused them. To will an act is to will its foreseeable consequences; if I'm unwilling to endorse a consequence, I should be unwilling to take the action that would lead to it.

The senses of “should” and “must” involved here are simply what follows by acknowledging the facts of reality—specifically, the facts of causality in the external world, and the facts of causality arising from my own agency. To violate the principle of conditional necessity, whether as regards causes or consequences, is to flout my own awareness of causal reality. To will the end without willing the means is either to deny that the end requires specific means, or to deny that I've actually willed the end, both of which are plainly false. To refuse to acknowledge the consequences of my actions is implicitly to deny the efficacy of my own agency.<sup>8</sup>

Three additional points are worth making about this principle. First, the principle gets its name by contrast with the idea of *categorical necessity*. A categorical moral necessity is one that supersedes causality, both causally and consequentially: a categorical imperative binds intrinsically, out of relation to the agent's goals (as in Kant's claim that a good will is “good in itself”) and it binds deontically, out of relation to the consequences of action (as in Kant's injunction to practice justice “though the heavens may fall”). By contrast, conditional necessity is conditional because its binding force is conditioned precisely on the way causality applies to moral agents. I *must* take measures literally *because* (and *only* because) my goals require it. Had I no goals, I would be subject to no constraints.

---

<sup>8</sup> See Smith, *VV*, pp. 38-53; Rand, “Causality Versus Duty,” pp. 95-101 in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, (Signet, 1982). Cf. Thomas Hill, “The Hypothetical Imperative,” pp. 17-37 in *Dignity and Practical Reason in Kant's Moral Theory*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

Secondly, though the principle is grounded in facts about causality, it is perfectly consistent with freedom. While the principle provides practical constraints, it leaves me metaphysically free to set goals, and free to select the means to those goals; it also leaves me free *not* to set goals, and free to flout the principle itself in any number of ways. It does *not* leave me free to repeal the facts that the principle identifies, however. If I have a goal, only certain measures will suffice to enact it: my will has no say about that fact. If I refuse to enact the relevant measures, or refuse to set the goal, or refuse to heed the relevant consequences, causality will still operate in specific and determinate ways with specific and determinate consequences for me. My will has no say about *that* fact, either. So the principle identifies the background context within which free will operates. Freedom opens up alternatives; reality constrains them without encroaching on freedom itself. The principle of conditional necessity codifies that fact, and partly answers question (1).

The principle of conditional necessity does seem, at least *prima facie*, to provide an objective constraint on action consistent with freedom. But the way in which it does so provokes as many new questions as it answers. For one thing, the principle guides action on the assumption that the agent *has* goals. But the principle neither says that the agent *must* have goals, nor (*a fortiori*) identifies which goals she ought to have. Further, the principle provides no account of its own binding force: if goals are what bind agents, then the principle of conditional necessity only binds an agent if the agent regards adherence to the principle *itself* as a goal. But the principle doesn't explain why this must be so. Granted, violation of the principle would implicate the violator in self-deception, and might perhaps bring her adverse consequences. But a given agent may be willing to live with such self-deception, and in any case, by itself, the principle gives us no standard by which to distinguish beneficial from adverse consequences. Nor in any case does it give us a reason for preferring beneficial to adverse consequences. Clearly, then, the principle can't be the whole of the normative story.

In form, that story will have to identify *the ultimate condition that grounds the principle of conditional necessity*. If the principle of conditional necessity tells me what to do if I have a goal, we need to identify a principle that tells me why I must have goals in the first place—and tells me which ones to have, providing a way of ranking goals by their value. If the principle of conditional necessity only binds insofar as it *is* a goal, we need to identify the ultimate goal in relation to which adherence to the principle is a necessary means. If the consequence of violating the principle is self-deception, we need to identify a principle that explains what's wrong with self-deception. If violation of the principle brings the agent adverse consequences, we need a standard for distinguishing beneficial from adverse consequences, and one that explains why the beneficial is to be preferred to the adverse as such.

Smith's answer, which comes from Rand, turns on the conditional character of *life* as the ultimate (unconditioned) conditional necessity.

Following the Aristotelian tradition, Rand characterizes life as a conditional process of self-generated and self-sustaining action.

The existence of inanimate matter is unconditional, the existence of life is not: it depends on a specific course of action. Matter is indestructible, it changes its forms, but it cannot cease to exist. It is only a living organism that faces a constant alternative: the issue of life or death. Life is a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action. If an organism fails in that action, it dies; its chemical elements remain, but its life goes out of existence.<sup>9</sup>

In short, what this means is that a living being's very existence as the entity it is depends on its engaging in a complex repertoire of continuous action across its lifespan, generated and directed by the organism itself.<sup>10</sup> The nature or identity of an organism determines the kind of action appropriate to it. Precisely because each organism *has* a determinate nature, each has needs, and because each has needs, each has a determinate mode of life appropriate to its capacities and environment. Given the determinacy of modes of life so conceived, there is such a thing as acting *in accordance with*, and acting *against*, the requirements of an organism's life—the most obvious requirements being those of physical health and functionality, the less obvious including proper mental functioning and psychological health. An organism's default on its mode of life undermines or impairs its functionality by degrees; severe default undermines its existence and identity altogether, and leads ultimately to death. Let's call this complex fact *the conditionality of life*, the thesis expressing it *the conditionality thesis*, and the entities to which it applies, *conditional entities*.

Contrary to a common misinterpretation, the central idea behind the conditionality thesis is not that life is a necessary condition for valuation, given that one can only value while alive (or no longer can if dead). Nor is the real point that life is a sufficient condition for valuation, in the sense that anything that's alive is bound to be valuing. Both claims are true, of course, but both miss the distinctive point of the thesis, which is fundamental explanatory.<sup>11</sup> We need an explanation for the conditional structure of valuation—for the fact that a goal necessitates the selection of means on its behalf, and that the consequences of an action matter to the agent bringing

---

<sup>9</sup> Rand, "Objectivist Ethics," p. 16. Cf. Aristotle, *De Anima* II.2-4, and *Generation of Animals* II.1.

<sup>10</sup> Harry Binswanger, *The Biological Basis of Teleological Concepts*, (Los Angeles: ARI Press, 1990), ch. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Peikoff makes this point as well, *Objectivism*, pp. 212-213.

them about. The conditionality of life explains both facts because conditionality is the property underlying both facts.<sup>12</sup> It's only living things qua living that *have* to set goals. It's only living things qua living that are affected by the goals they set, and by the manner in which those goals are pursued. A conditional entity has to set goals to meet its needs, and has to meet its needs to remain in existence, satisfying higher-order needs once the initial needs have been met, and yet higher-order needs once the intermediate needs have been met. Failure to satisfy needs undermines the entity's existence in proportion to the urgency of the need. Such an entity, whether rational or non-rational, conscious or non-conscious, faces a constant alternative, and the constant necessity of appropriate action in the face of that alternative. "Appropriate action" is action that takes life as the ultimate conditional necessity, and selects ends and means accordingly.

The conditionality thesis thus shows us that the principle of conditional necessity is not a freestanding thesis, but one rooted in a deeper phenomenon. If an organism is to preserve its existence and identity, it must act appropriately to its nature and circumstances. Being organisms, the thesis applies to us as well in the form of the principle of conditional necessity. It also explains what the principle of conditionality necessity by itself leaves unexplained. The principle of conditional necessity guides action on the assumption that the agent has goals, without explaining why she must, or which goals she ought to have. The conditionality thesis explains both: the agent must have goals to preserve her existence, and she must select those goals which would preserve the existence of a being like her. The principle of conditionality, we saw, provides no account of its own binding force; it leaves unanswered why one ought to adopt it as a goal. The conditionality thesis shows us that if an organism has a specific nature, its preservation can only be achieved by specific means—and that is what the principle of conditional necessity identifies. The principle of conditional necessity gives us no standard of beneficial and adverse, and no reason for preferring one to the other. The conditionality thesis does: survival qua human is the standard of value; self-preservation gives us a reason for preferring the beneficial to the harmful.

---

<sup>12</sup> Robert Nozick misses this point entirely in his much-celebrated "On the Randian Argument," (first published in *The Personalist*, vol. 52 (Spring 1971), pp. 282-304, reprinted in *Socratic Puzzles*, [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997]): "I would most like to set out the argument as a deductive argument and then examine the premises. Unfortunately, it is not clear to me what the argument is." (p. 249). Nozick's attempt to set out the "argument as a deductive argument" misses the point: "The Objectivist Ethics" is primarily a teleological explanation for why we *must* value, not (as Nozick tortuously interprets it) a "transcendental argument" for the *possibility* of value. Consequently, little of Nozick's discussion has any genuine relevance to Rand's argument. The oddity of Nozick's interpretive approach is heightened by his own insistence on the difference between explanations and deductions in the Introduction of his *Philosophical Explanations*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).



Finally, we saw that the principle of conditional necessity presupposes some version of a reality-orientation or reality principle; it only applies to the extent that the agent chooses not to flout the deliverances of her mind. The conditionality thesis explains why: contact with reality is a requirement of life itself.

That, in short, is the answer to Question (1). Ultimately, I must engage in valuation because as a living being, I'm a conditional being, and as a conditional being, my life depends on self-generated and self-sustaining action. Nor does it ever stop depending on it. If life requires continuous action, then every need I satisfy will bring another one in its wake, at a higher level of complexity. Whatever the variety and complexity of that structure, each element in it gets its ultimate *raison d'être* from its contribution to my life. Default on any element is default on the specifically human mode of living. I can ignore or evade that fact about myself, but I can't escape it—at least so long as I aim to exist. If so, I have to identify what to pursue, and how to pursue it; I have to find what's valuable, and resolve to track it.

What, then, about Question (2)? So far, we've learned that the conditionality of life requires constant valuation of us, and grounds one principle: the principle of conditional necessity. But even if we grant that, how does that give rise to a *code* of values?

First, a terminological detour: what is a "code"? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a "code" as a systematic collection or listing of statutes, rules, regulations, or signals. A code of *values*, we might infer, is a set of interconnected principles by means of which values are sought. This is clear enough in particular cases. A judge by definition values justice; she needs a legal code to secure it, and the judicial temperament to follow the code. A fire inspector by definition values fire-safe buildings; she has to insist that every building be "up to code," and cultivate the habits appropriate to her task. And so on, through any number of practices. The idea of a "code" in this context captures two things: (a) the *systematicity* of a collection of complex principles geared to realizing specific purposes in the world, and (b) the *traits* required to follow those principles in the concrete circumstances of the world. By induction, a moral agent would be someone who by definition valued moral ends, and sought those ends by adherence to the principles and habits constitutive of moral action.

Now let's return to our question. Human beings must value because we have needs, and we have needs because we're living, conditional entities. Conditional entities must value to remain in existence and to maintain their identities. Is having a code *itself* a value for a being in such a predicament?

The short answer is "yes." We've already seen how the conditionality of life underwrites a principle of conditional necessitation. The short answer for why we need a code of values is that the application of that principle is complex. Without a code for applying it, we would have no idea *how* to apply it. The fact that we need codes to engage in specific human practices—legal, professional, recreational, etc.—lends credence to the idea that we need a

meta-code that integrates and if necessary overrides the more particular ones. That meta-code is a code of moral values.

The longer answer requires that we look more carefully at how the conditionality of life gives rise to specifically moral value. In answering question (1), I noted that though the conditionality thesis applies to all organisms, it applies differently to each. The differences in application can be designated as differences of form and of content. As a matter of form, the conditionality thesis applies differently to human beings because we are the only organisms capable of following it on principle. As a matter of content, we differ because our needs and environment are different: it requires different actions and conditions of us than it requires of them.

As Ayn Rand first suggested,<sup>13</sup> conditionality is an attribute of all and only organisms—from the lowliest prokaryote all the way across the biological taxa. Since humans are organisms, human beings are therefore conditional beings like all the others. Given the distinctiveness of human nature, however, the conditionality thesis (and the principle of conditional necessitation) applies in a special way to human beings—a way of particular importance to ethics. Our distinctive nature, for Rand as for Smith, arises from the special features of human consciousness, which differentiate us from all of the other organisms.

First consider the differences in *form*. In the other organisms, valuation is a thoroughly deterministic phenomenon, genetically coded by natural selection, and triggered by features of the environment. Whatever their simplicity or complexity, the lives of non-human organisms proceed more or less automatically—from metabolism, homeostasis and growth, through locomotion, learning, and cooperation. Non-human organisms are in short, automatic, deterministic value-trackers with life as their ultimate value, and an automatic awareness of, and propensity to act on, their needs. The problem of the conditionality of life is for them solved by *genetic coding*. They follow the principle of conditional necessitation because they can do no other.

By contrast, human beings are volitional, rational agents born *tabula rasa*. The fact that we're *tabula rasae* entails that we have no automatic means of discovering what our life-requirements are, or of maintaining a consistent commitment to them. Lacking innate knowledge, we have to discover our means of survival for ourselves; lacking innate behaviors or traits of character, we have to cultivate a willed commitment to tracking the good. Our distinctive moral task, then, is to employ volition and reason in the service of both ends. The problem posed by the conditionality of life is for us a matter of explicit, *volitional and rational* codification. We have to devise and live by a life-code on our own because we can willfully surrender our grip on the

---

<sup>13</sup> For a more sustained argument, see Binswanger, *Biological Basis*, especially chs. 8-9.

conditionality of life, violating the principle of conditional necessitation, or any of its subsidiary principles.

Now consider issues of *content*. The basic issue here is that our nature differs radically from that of the other organisms. Consider first the sheer temporal extension of a human life. A full human life consists of the total expected length of an entire lifespan—say, eighty or ninety years. So we need a code that will last the distance, and traits that will do so as well. The second is the unity of a human life. A human lifespan is not just a series of disaggregated and unrelated sequences, but an integrated whole, each of whose parts contributes to the sum. So we need a code that will serve to integrate the parts into a whole, and traits that will do the same.<sup>14</sup> The third crucial difference is that human beings are reflective organisms with a conception of, and need for, self-worth. The life we lead is one we reflect on, and one that we evaluate; the worth we ascribe to our purposes affects the quality of our lives. So we need a code that allows us to live lives we can endorse as worthy. Finally, human beings are social beings, but our mode of sociality differs fundamentally from that of the other social animals, precisely because of the differences of form and content in the application to us of the conditionality thesis. So a genuinely human code of social interaction will (at a minimum) have to reflect the preceding facts.

A code of values, then, is a system of principles, adopted by choice and internalized in character, which fully satisfies the uniquely human version of the problem of discovering and tracking values: *By what code does a long-lived, fully integrated, self-respecting social animal preserve itself?* The question is analogous to the questions that a biologist might ask of sunflowers, amoeba, wasps, lizards, lions, or dolphins. We need to preserve ourselves across a lifespan, as they do, but our mode of life differs from theirs to the extent that our life-requirements differ from theirs. We need morality to do for us what genetics does for them. That answers Question (2).

I can only touch here on Question (3): what code of values do human beings need? A moral code of values is a set of principles that aims to maintain an individual's existence by maintaining that individual's adherence to a human mode of life—i.e., to the way that the principle of conditional necessitation applies in the human case. The principles take the form of what Smith calls “fundamental prescriptive generalizations” (VV, p. 165), identifying the values that preserve and unify a full human life and enjoining action on their behalf. The traits take the form of self-beneficial virtues, geared to achieving the values in question.

The most fundamental principle on which the entire code is based is its ultimate standard of value—survival qua man. In Ayn Rand's words,

---

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, pp. 229-233.

Man's survival qua man means the terms, methods, conditions, and goals required for the survival of a rational being through the whole of his lifespan—in all those aspects of existence which are open to his choice.<sup>15</sup>

This standard, on Rand's view, gives rise to the need for three cardinal values: reason, purpose, and self-esteem, along with their corresponding virtues, rationality, productiveness, and pride. The cardinal virtues and values as Rand puts it are jointly "the means to and realization of" the ultimate value, life.<sup>16</sup> They are, we might say, the actions and traits that make sustained adherence to the principle of conditional necessitation possible.

The standard of survival qua human also gives rise to other virtues, whose function in each case is to give us a constant, automatized (though not automatic) awareness of the facts required to pursue our values and maintain a commitment to them. Though the requirements of each of the virtues is complex, each has what might be called a "teleo-epistemic" function, facilitating in different ways a commitment to what I earlier called the reality-orientation. That commitment is volitional; it requires effort to maintain. Obviously, traits that influence and facilitate such effort will be assets to an entity aiming to do so. Virtue on this conception is therefore fundamentally a matter of applied epistemology. Among the major virtues Rand mentions are independence, integrity, honesty, justice, and benevolence,<sup>17</sup> each described as adjuncts of rationality, and each described in this "teleo-epistemic" way.

This short outline of the Smith-Rand argument should alert us to the sheer distance between the Objectivist view of what ethics is about and the view we find in mainstream philosophy. In fact, a mainstream ethicist might well wonder whether I've been talking about *ethics* at all in this section. The reason for the puzzlement, I suspect, derives from the distance between the claims of the conditionality thesis and the standard operating concept of mainstream ethics, "the moral point of view." I turn to that issue next.

#### IV. Ethical Egoism Versus "the Moral Point of View"

The standard approach to morality in the mainstream literature is not to begin with the Question "Why be moral?" or anything like it, but to define morality

---

<sup>15</sup> Ayn Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," p. 26.

<sup>16</sup> Ayn Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," p. 27.

<sup>17</sup> Benevolence is not on Rand's list of virtues in "The Objectivist Ethics," but she clearly endorses some such virtue in "The Ethics of Emergencies," (*Virtue of Selfishness*, essay 3) and in her remarks on the "benevolent sense of life" in *The Romantic Manifesto*, rev. ed., (New York: Signet, 1975), and in her novels.

circularly in terms of what is usually called “the moral point of view.”<sup>18</sup> The moral point of view is a distinctive outlook on the world, which literally transforms the way it looks to the agent who adopts it. In doing so, one brings out the world’s morally salient features at the expense of its non-moral ones, filters out the latter, and adopts principles to govern one’s actions—usually in a social context.

One of the differentiating features of specifically moral principles on this view is their *impersonality*. In taking the moral point of view, one explicitly excludes considerations of self-benefit in assessing the moral worth of an action; one sees oneself as merely one member of the moral community, each one of whom is equally and agent-neutrally significant in one’s deliberations. Impersonality so conceived is typically thought to constitute morality as such, and is therefore neutral between conceptions of morality—neo-Kantian, Utilitarian, Contractarian, etc. The differences between these mainstream theories are differences *within* the moral point of view, not alternatives to it.<sup>19</sup> On the mainstream conception, then, though self-interest is at least occasionally a permissible motive of action, it remains conceptually at odds with morality. Though we may make concessions to self-interest, it’s not itself a moral motive; to the extent that we insist on acting from a *specifically* moral motive, we must put self-interest aside.

---

<sup>18</sup> The *locus classicus* is Kurt Baier’s *The Moral Point of View*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1958); see also Baier’s “Moral Reasons and Reasons to be Moral,” in *Values and Morals*, edited by Alvin I. Goldman and Jaegwon Kim, (Dordrecht, Holland: Reidel, 1978).

Other notable accounts include R.M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963); Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), and *The View from Nowhere*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), chs. 8-10; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); William Frankena, *Ethics*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Press, 1973); J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1977), chs. 4-5; Alan Gewirth, *Reason and Morality*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979); David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Kai Nielsen, *Why be Moral?* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989); Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

For a useful overview of the debate, see *The Definition of Morality*, (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd, 1970), edited by G. Wallace and A.D.M. Walker.

<sup>19</sup> I think this remains largely true of so-called Virtue Theory as well, e.g., as described by Greg Pence in his entry “Virtue Theory” in *A Companion to Ethics*, pp. 249-258; see also the references he cites therein. At best, Virtue Theorists strike me as ambivalent about the impersonality constraint, not opposed to it.

Philosophers in the past few decades have begun to take issue with the stringency of the impersonality constraint, and with some of its particular demands, but none goes nearly as far as Smith in rejecting the constraint itself.<sup>20</sup> Against the impersonality thesis, Smith argues that the conditionality of life entails a commitment to *ethical egoism*: every moral obligation serves our objective self-interest; none fails to do so. More precisely, ethical egoism may be defined as the view that a moral agent should be the ultimate intended beneficiary of every action he takes.<sup>21</sup> As Smith interprets it, ethical egoism entails that morality just *is* self-interest, and vice versa: “principled egoism is the only way to live” (in her words) because it’s the only way to be *moral*. This claim is perhaps the most controversial one in *Viable Values*, and is also the substantive ethical thesis for which Ayn Rand is most notorious.

How do we get from the conditionality thesis to ethical egoism? Smith puts the point succinctly. If life is the standard of value, self-benefit is the only rational and permissible motive: “Human beings survive *by* acting for their own benefit.” (*VV*, p. 155). Ethical egoism, then, is the first-personal expression of the conditionality thesis. Suppose I accept the conditionality thesis. In doing so, I make survival qua human my end; given the nature of human survival, the end in turn requires adherence to the principle of conditional necessitation. But that principle counsels that I adopt motivations consonant with the conditionality thesis, and reject all motivations at odds with it. It’s obvious, I think, why egoism is consonant with conditionality, while acting from the motives of duty or altruism are at odds with it. If my own good is my ultimate reason for acting, I have no reason to constrain my actions by norms positively subversive of my good (e.g., deontic side-constraints), and I have no reason to sacrifice my good to others who make no causal contribution to it. Neither altruism nor side-constraints could arise as a result of conditional necessities derived from the requirements of survival qua human, because adherence to neither brings me any survival-benefit. Hence no such action could be sanctioned by the standard of survival qua man, and every such action is to be ruled out. Following Smith, let’s call a life lived by this standard, a life of *flourishing*.

Flourishing so conceived involves a plan for an entire life, which itself involves a commitment to principled action internalized by self-

---

<sup>20</sup> Classic expressions of this view include Bernard Williams, “Persons, Character, and Morality,” in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 1-19; Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints,” *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 79 (August 1982), pp. 419-439; John Cottingham, “The Ethics of Self-Concern,” *Ethics*, vol. 101 (1991), pp. 798-817; and Jean Hampton, “Selflessness and the Loss of Self,” in *Self-Interest*, edited by J. Paul, F. Miller, and E. F. Paul, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 135-165.

<sup>21</sup> I owe this definition to Allan Gotthelf.

beneficial virtues. I mentioned some of the specific virtues earlier, but a general point about the role of virtue is worth stressing. The virtues, recall, give us an automatized grasp of the requirements of survival qua man. In doing so, they call for a principled commitment to virtue across the whole of one's lifespan, a commitment that requires that the agent make principled action an ineliminable part of his moral identity. As Smith argues, this commitment to virtue is strong enough to rule out the (apparent) value of "ill-gotten gains" derived from violations of moral principle: "Something is in a person's interest only if it offers a net benefit to the person's life. Since a person's life is not reducible to any isolated element of his condition, we cannot fasten on such elements to draw conclusions" about his interests (*IV*, p. 168).<sup>22</sup> Note, however, that virtue is not "an isolated element" of one's condition, but rather something one needs across the whole of one's lifespan. The requirements of virtue, then, are always part of the calculation of "net benefit," and they override (rather than merely outweigh) vice. So *this* momentary departure from moral principle—this isolated, secret act of vice—no matter how tempting or apparently beneficial, is never in my interest.

Egoism so conceived is a "positive-sum game" (Smith's term) that holds out the possibility of a harmony of interests in which the virtue of each agent becomes an asset for that of every other. The harmony is underwritten by the fact that each virtuous agent sees his benefit in the virtues rather than the vices (or involuntary weaknesses) of others. A virtuous egoist benefits neither by sacrificing his interests to others, nor by preying on their vices or vulnerabilities, but by interacting with others in order to gain from their virtues

---

<sup>22</sup> Though I generally agree with it, Smith's statement of the ill-gotten gains thesis is somewhat ambiguous on two counts.

- (1) Smith says that ill-gotten goods lack value, but does not explicitly tell us *for whom* they lack it. She is clearly committed to the thesis that ill-gotten goods lack value for the practitioner of wrongdoing. But we sometimes benefit from ill-gotten goods that others have acquired illegitimately without ourselves doing so; it's unclear to me what Smith would say about such cases. Would Smith say that we do not benefit from goods manufactured through slave labor, or goods that owe their existence to compulsory redistribution? Do I derive no benefit from the shirt I'm wearing if it was made (unbeknownst to me) in a slave labor camp in some Third World country? The problem because sharper given Smith's rejection elsewhere of compulsory redistribution (cf. *Moral Rights and Political Freedom*, [Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995]). Are redistributed goods *never* beneficial? They sometimes at least appear so: think of the roads we all drive on, the electricity we all use, or the compulsory public health inspections that save us from illness. If Smith wants to deny that such "goods" are genuinely beneficial, we need a more detailed account of the matter.
- (2) Smith does not explicitly integrate her account of ill-gotten gains with the Objectivist thesis that moral principles apply differently in emergencies than they do in the rest of life. If I steal a boat to save someone drowning in a lake, is that use an ill-gotten gain?

and strengths, and by implication, from their self-interest. The rational pursuit of self-interest, then, is never the *cause* of conflicts of interest, because virtue constitutes our self-interest, and virtue can never be the cause of conflict. Conflicts arise not through the pursuit of objective interests, but through violations of the egoistic principles that secure our interests (*IV*, pp. 174-187).

This picture of egoism is very distant from the one we find in the mainstream literature. Kurt Baier's argument for excluding egoistic considerations from the moral point of view is typical of the mainstream conception of egoism:

Morality is designed to apply in just such cases, namely, those where interests conflict. But if the point of view of morality were that of self-interest, then there could never be moral solutions of conflicts of interest. However, when there are conflicts of interest, we always look for a 'higher' point of view, one from which such conflicts can be settled. Consistent egoism makes everyone's private interest the 'highest court of appeal'. But by the 'moral point of view' we mean a point of view which is a court of appeal for conflicts of interest. Hence it cannot (logically) be identical with the point of view of self-interest.<sup>23</sup>

In a similar vein, James Rachels's polemic against egoism, which we can take to be representative of a type, is notorious. An egoist, Rachels argues, would have no reason not to burn down a building on whim, just for the spectacle of the fire and thrill of burning everyone inside to death. After all, if he *found* the action self-beneficial, what principle of egoism could one invoke to condemn him?<sup>24</sup>

These arguments are the standard ones in the literature, repeated in virtually identical form wherever they are found. Despite their ubiquity, however, they are, I think, remarkably weak arguments, proceeding as they do from a common premise that none demonstrates—viz., that consistent egoism *does* in fact lead to conflicts of interest. The assumption that underwrites this claim is the belief that egoism involves a form of unconstrained preference-satisfaction. Since it is, "egoism" becomes a kind of black box, in both metaphorical senses of "black": inscrutable and nefarious. On this view, the agent's "self-interest" consists in doing whatever he wants, however he wants.

The problem with such accounts of egoism is not merely that the claim about conflicts of interests goes undefended; it's that we've been given no way of giving any content *at all* to the concept of "self-interest." Nothing in

---

<sup>23</sup> Kurt Baier, *The Moral Point of View*, p. 190.

<sup>24</sup> James Rachels, "Egoism and Moral Skepticism," p. 406 in *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life: Introductory Readings in Ethics*, (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), edited by Christina Hoff Sommers and Fred Sommers.



these discussions tells us *what* egoism prescribes (or why), or why anyone would think it rational, much less why it must lead to conflicts of interest. The ultimate court of appeal about the content of egoism reduces instead to linguistic consensus: “we” all speak as though consistent egoism led to conflicts of interest; since “we” generally think that “our” speech mirrors the way the world is, “we” should assume that ordinary language proves that egoism leads to conflicts of interest.

In the space I have available, let me simply offer a laundry list of reasons why I think these arguments fail, taking Smith’s account and discussion of egoism as my point of departure.

For one thing, it’s unclear why the claims of ordinary English language such assume such extraordinary epistemic powers in defining the nature of human self-interest. After all, self-interest is not so conceived in other languages—e.g., Attic Greek, ancient Arabic, or modern Urdu, for instance. In any case, if the conditionality thesis is true, our lives are structured by a determinate set of interests, whose nature is as discoverable as the requirements of health. We would (or at least should) surely be alarmed to discover that medical schools were teaching their students that the principles of clinical diagnosis and practice were based on nothing but the “linguistic intuitions of the medical community in reflective equilibrium.” Why should it be any different in ethics? Reflective equilibrium is no better a method for discovering methods of medical practice than it is for discovering methods of ethical practice. Indeed, it’s not a method of discovery at all.

Second, and relatedly, virtually nothing in the literature on egoism focuses on what actual egoists—e.g., Aristotle, Spinoza, Ayn Rand—have actually said about what our interests *are*. The preference is to concoct notional confrontations with notional egoists, bearing no relationship to actual defenders of the view. When this literature occasionally does make reference to historical egoists, it typically downplays their egoism; when it makes reference to contemporary egoists, like Ayn Rand, it typically distorts their claims in fantastic ways, or ignores important aspects of what they say. Perhaps Smith’s book will help to remedy this.

Third, there is little appreciation in this literature of the need or nature of planning an egoistic *life-plan*, taking one’s life as a single unit of long-term deliberation, as opposed to thinking of one’s life as a series of disaggregated and discrete moments. Consequently, the focus in the literature is always on problems of choice in the context of range-of-the-moment situations, as in Rachels’s arson example. But if Smith’s argument is right, an egoist is someone who adopts value-tracking principles and virtues so as *not* to live by the range-of-the-moment. Confronted by a supposed egoist with a yen for arson, as in Rachels’s example, the obvious question is: Why would arson promote his life as described in Smith’s or Rand’s theory? What life-promoting principles does it express? Such questions are never posed in the mainstream literature, even by implication.

Fourth, there is little or no discussion of the place of *virtue* in such a life or life-plan; when the egoist's values are not straightforwardly depicted as psychopathological, discussions of egoism almost always concern the unjust seizure of external goods (or exploitation of persons for this purpose). Such claims miss the point: on an egoistic view, virtue is in our interest, and the external goods are only valuable when they're gotten by virtuous means (*VV*, pp. 164-187).<sup>25</sup> So such examples are irrelevant unless they discuss the egoistic conception of virtue on its own terms.

Finally, there is little appreciation for how large a generalization the conflicts of interest claim is. Egoism, Baier tells us, is "among the *main causes* of our social problems."<sup>26</sup> But where does one get evidence of such a thing? None is ever provided, apart from adducing discrete examples of conflict-situations. Isolated examples, however, don't prove that something is "among the main causes" of something else; at best, they serve to confirm the initial impression that it is. If virtue as previously described is in our self-interest, how could it be among *any* of the causes of our social problems? This, too, is left unaddressed.

#### V. Categoricity Versus the Choice to Live

As suggested in the previous section, mainstream ethics is based on "the moral point of view." One of its differentiating features, as remarked there, is a commitment to impersonality. Another is the *categoricity* of moral obligation.

On the standard conception of morality, whatever their superficial grammatical form, moral principles are categorically binding, as opposed to conditionally so: morality consists of an important class of duties that one owes without having been incurred by any voluntary act. One just *has* them, period. As Rawls puts it, [I]t is characteristic of natural duties that they apply to us without regard to our voluntary acts... Thus if the basic structure of society is just... everyone has a natural duty to do his part in the existing scheme. Each is bound to these institutions independent of his voluntary acts, performative or otherwise.<sup>27</sup>

Likewise Stephen Darwall:

While other elements of Kant's theory of morals...perhaps reflect rather poorly any very widely shared view about morality, his insistence that moral

---

<sup>25</sup> Except in emergency situations, as discussed in "The Ethics of Emergencies," in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, essay 3.

<sup>26</sup> Kurt Baier, "Egoism," in *A Companion to Ethics*, p. 197.

<sup>27</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 114, 115.

requirements are categorical imperatives expresses our common sense about an important part of ethics.<sup>28</sup>

And James Rachels:

Commonsense morality would say, then, that you should give money for famine relief rather than spending it on the movies.

This way of thinking involves a general assumption about our moral duties: it is assumed that we have moral duties *to other people*—and not merely duties we create, such as by making a promise or incurring a debt. We have natural duties to others *simply because they are people who could be helped or harmed by our actions*.<sup>29</sup>

Such claims are widespread in mainstream ethics. The language of “binding” suggests the metaphor of a sort of cord that “ties” the agent inescapably to various duties. But the very description of a natural duty suggests that there is no way to explain how the cord came to be placed around us.

On the Objectivist view, by contrast, moral obligation is conditional all the way down. In fact, its conditionality rests on the individual’s choice. As Rand puts it, “To live is [man’s] basic act of choice. If he chooses to live, a rational ethics will tell him what principles of action are required to implement his choice. If he does not choose to live, nature will take its course.”<sup>30</sup> Smith writes, “the choice to live is prerational. It is a presupposition of the standards of rationality” (*VV*, 107).

The categorical conception of obligation poses a challenge to the Smith-Rand view of moral obligation, which makes moral obligation ultimately conditional on a “choice to live.” If the Objectivist view is really “objective,” how can morality’s binding force rest on a choice? Doesn’t it then collapse into subjectivity? We can make this objection more specific by subdividing it into two sub-objections. The first objection concerns the *escapability* of conditional obligations; the second concerns their apparent *arbitrariness*.

The escapability objection goes as follows. Either moral obligation is categorical or it’s merely conditional on a choice. If it’s categorical, the agent has obligations independently of her choices. If it’s conditional, by contrast, her obligations depend on her choice. But if obligation depends on choice,

---

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Darwall, *Impartial Reason*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 173.

<sup>29</sup> James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1993), p. 76.

<sup>30</sup> Ayn Rand, “Causality Versus Duty,” in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 99.

what if the agent doesn't make the relevant choice? Then she's not obliged. But surely morality, and especially justice, must be "inescapable." Hence moral obligation must be categorical, not conditional.

The arbitrariness objection goes as follows. Either moral obligation is conditional or categorical. If it's conditional, it depends on a choice. But suppose someone decides not to make that choice. Then she's beyond the reach of morality. Imagine now that we try to persuade her to be moral. Clearly, to persuade her, we must appeal to *reasons* to make the relevant choice. But in the nature of the case, there are no reasons to give; the choice is "prerational." Hence the choice must be arbitrary, and must make morality arbitrary. Since morality is not merely arbitrary, its binding force must not rest on a choice.

It's clear that for both Smith and Rand, though the conditionality of life explains the overridingness of morality, its binding force for any given individual is conditional, not categorical. So if the two preceding objections were sound, they would apply to, and undermine, the Objectivist view. Though Ayn Rand discusses the issue in her essay "Causality Versus Duty," (where she articulated the view), she never addressed the preceding objections as such. In *Viable Values*, Smith couches her own account of the choice to live as a series of discrete responses to objections (*IV*, pp. 103-117) without, in my view quite offering a positive interpretation of the idea. In what follows, I offer my own thoughts on the issue, which I believe are an extension of Rand's view, and are compatible with Smith's.<sup>31</sup>

The key to understanding the "choice to live," as I see it, is to think of the binding force of an ultimate value by analogy with the binding force of a logical axiom, on the Aristotelian conception of an axiom (cf. *IV*, p. 107).<sup>32</sup> So conceived, an axiom can be thoroughly conditional in its binding force without being either escapable or arbitrary in the senses implied by the objections just described. Though ideally, it would have been best to compare Smith's account of the choice to live with Ayn Rand's conception of "axiomatic concepts," to avoid a lengthy exposition of that concept, I'll use the more familiar example of Aristotle's defense of the Principle of Non-Contradiction (PNC).

At *Metaphysics* IV.3, Aristotle enunciates the PNC: "A thing cannot be and not-be at the same, in the same respect." This is an undeniable and foundational truth; its truth is merely re-affirmed in the attempt to doubt or deny it. Note, however, that the Principle is not a categorical injunction to engage in thought. In fact, it says nothing at all about thought, nor is it a

---

<sup>31</sup> I owe the inspiration for my view to Allan Gotthelf's 1990 Ayn Rand Society paper, "The Choice to Value," but he is not responsible for my way of formulating the issues.

<sup>32</sup> On axioms, see Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, I.2, *Metaphysics* IV.3, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.2.

prescription of any kind. It merely states a fact about the world—one that becomes a guide for thought when and only when one *chooses* to think. In choosing to engage in thought, one sees in one’s own case that *if* one is to do so successfully (i.e., at all), one *must* obey the PNC without exception. An isolated attempt to evade the Principle would be self-subverting. A wholesale attempt to evade it would render one entirely unable to think. And any attempt intermediate between these would be *both* self-subverting *and* render one incapable of thought, in proportion to the extent of the violation. In choosing to think, then, one is therefore bound by the Principle without ever having been forced or enjoined to do so. Indeed, given the conceptual relation between the PNC and thought, one can choose to be bound by it without ever having explicitly formulated it as a principle.

Is the PNC “escapable”? In one sense, yes; in another sense, not really. One *can* escape the PNC—if one is willing to pay the price. The PNC binds all thought; one way to evade it, then, is simply to stop thinking. And refusing to think *is* a way of escaping the PNC. The PNC applies *if* (and only if) one aims at thought. It *doesn’t* apply to a non-thinker. On the other hand, its non-application to the non-thinker is hardly a threat to its logical or epistemic authority. A non-thinker can’t constitute a problem for someone espousing the PNC, because she can’t even raise whatever objection she might have to it. In fact, she can’t even have an objection she refuses to raise, since even having a voiceless objection requires putting the objection in words, which calls the PNC back into operation. So the “problem” of escapability is no problem at all: the price of escape is such that it cannot, in principle, pose a threat to the Principle.

Is the PNC “arbitrary”? Not at all. To be sure, there’s no *argument* for the PNC that proceeds from principles that are epistemically prior to and independent of it. But that’s because there *are* no such principles. The PNC is an epistemically basic principle; all principles presuppose its truth, and none could in principle support it. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides six relevant entries for the term “arbitrary”: “to be decided by one’s liking,” “dependent on one’s will or pleasure,” “at the discretion or option of anyone,” “derived from mere opinion or preference,” “capricious, uncertain, varying,” “unrestrained in the exercise of will.” I think it’s clear from these entries that the concept of “arbitrariness” only applies in contexts where we face two or more alternatives and choose one while ignoring *the established principle that adjudicates between them*. In the nature of the case, this stricture couldn’t apply to the PNC: putting aside the Law of Identity (which is equally basic),<sup>33</sup> the choice between accepting or rejecting the PNC couldn’t be governed by our choosing some *other* principle which told us to accept or reject it. There is no such principle, and couldn’t be one. So the PNC isn’t arbitrary, because it applies prior to the proper application of the very concept of “the arbitrary.”

---

<sup>33</sup> I mean  $A=A$ , not Leibniz’s Law.

The concept “arbitrary” only has meaning subsequent to accepting the PNC’s axiomatic status.

The analogy to moral obligation applies as follows. As a matter of non-prescriptive fact, life can only be kept in existence by a constant process of self-sustaining action. Moreover, life is unique in this respect: it’s the ultimate generator of practical requirements that explains why there are practical requirements at all. Let’s assume, on the basis of the argument in the third section of this paper, that life is the ultimate value in this sense.

Life’s conditional character, however, is not by itself a prescription. It’s simply a fact about the world. The fact by itself generates no categorical duty to keep one’s own life (or anyone else’s life) in existence, or indeed, to value or do anything at all. Life’s conditional character has prescriptive force for an agent when and only when the agent *chooses* to value and live, i.e., chooses to engage in goal-directed action, and chooses to promote her life by goal-directed action.

*In* choosing to live, one is conditionally bound by the requirements of life. The momentary attempt to evade that fact would lead one to practical inconsistency: if I will life as an end, I must will the means to it; if I refuse to will the means, I must give up the end. So a momentary act of evasion would stand condemned as a single violation of the principle of conditional necessitation. The wholesale attempt to evade the conditionality of life, of course, leads the evader to non-existence. And an intermediate attempt to live by combining rationality with irrationality or vice with a commitment to egoistic virtues would be futile: each commitment would either undercut the other, or else fail to yield the benefits that genuine commitment would bring. In choosing to live, then, one is bound to realize one’s life without ever having been required to do so by anything besides the choice to live. Note that as with the PNC, a person could well make the choice without making it under the description of “the choice to live” as described by the Objectivist literature (just as one can make the choice to be bound by the PNC without doing so in Aristotle’s words).

Is the choice to live escapable? Again, yes and no. It’s escapable in the sense that one can, in principle, fully opt out of the task of aiming at one’s self-preservation. But such a person is no more a threat to the authority of moral norms than the non-thinker is to the PNC. The person who denies the PNC is rendered incapable of thought; the person who denies the conditionality of life is rendered incapable (in the same sense of “incapacity”) of goal-directed action. The PNC-denier is rendered incapable of thought in proportion to her genuine commitment to denying the PNC. The life-denier is rendered incapable of action in proportion to her commitment to that denial.

Is the choice “arbitrary”? No. “Arbitrariness” is a matter of flouting some established principle. But once we take a regress of justifications back to an ultimate principle, there are no prescriptive principles left in terms of which to adjudicate the choice to adopt the ultimate principle. (This doesn’t mean that there is nothing to say about why the ultimate principle is ultimate.) *Ex*

*hypothesi*, the ultimate principle is survival qua human, so the ultimate choice is the choice to live. The choice, however, is hardly arbitrary. If life really *is* ultimate, then only *it* justifies normative standards and rational action. Whether or not it is ultimate is a matter of argument, and the argument of section II either succeeds or fails in this regard. If it succeeds, as I believe it does, then acceptance of life's ultimacy is the only thing that makes rational action possible. Since acceptance of that fact is ultimate, there is nothing arbitrary about accepting it in the only way it can be accepted. By contrast, if one rejects life, one has no legitimate claim to valuation based on standards at all. I conclude, then, that the "choice to live" is not arbitrary in any legitimate sense of that term.<sup>34</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

One of the great frustrations of anyone who has made his way through the literature on the Question "Why be moral?" is the fact that there are so few genuine attempts to answer it. What one too often gets in the literature is the admonition that the Question ought not to be asked because it's immoral to ask it—or the claim that what the Question ultimately requires is "the secular equivalent of faith in God" or recourse to "the sanctions of law" to persuade the recalcitrant.<sup>35</sup>

One of the merits of *Viable Values* is that, in offering a clear and accessible exposition of Rand's theory, it offers us neither faith nor force as an answer to the question it poses, but a satisfying and responsive one. Our own lives, as Smith puts it, are "the sum of morality's claims on us." "Life sets the standard of value, life is the goal of morality, life is the reward of morality. What stronger answer can one imagine to the question of why we should be

---

<sup>34</sup> I take the preceding argument to answer the objections raised in Eric Mack's "The Fundamental Moral Elements of Rand's Theory of Rights," pp. 133-35 in *The Philosophic Thought of Ayn Rand*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), edited by Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen.

Readers familiar with the debate between Philippa Foot and John McDowell on "morality as a system of hypothetical imperatives" may see a similarity between Rand's position and Foot's. Though Rand's position is closer to Foot's than to McDowell's, I think Foot's position falls prey to the "arbitrariness" objection discussed in the text in a way that Rand's does not. See Philippa Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," in *Virtues and Vices*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 157-73; John McDowell, "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 52 (Suppl. 1978), pp. 13-29.

<sup>35</sup> The first quotation comes from Annette Baier, "Secular Faith," pp. 204-5 in *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre. The second comes from Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. 220.

moral?" (*VV*, p. 187). As I hope to have made clear in this paper, I don't think there is one.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> This paper originated as a contribution to a book symposium on *Viable Values* arranged by the Ayn Rand Society, at the APA Eastern Division meeting in New York, December 28, 2000. I thank the symposium participants, Julia Driver, David Schmitz, and Tara Smith, as well as the audience, for stimulating discussion on that occasion. I'd also like to thank Robert Hartford and Gregory Salmieri for detailed written comments on the paper, and Carolyn Ray for the opportunity to present it at the Enlightenment Online Conference, March 2001. Finally, a special thanks to Allan Gotthelf, who put the ARS program together, and whose comments on earlier drafts improved the paper immeasurably.



Cohen, Randy. *The Good, the Bad, and the Difference: How To Tell Right From Wrong In Everyday Situations*. Doubleday, 2002.

In a hotel bar you see a friend's spouse in a romantic embrace with a stranger. Should you tell? A local businessman with ties to organized crime offers your charitable organization a sizeable donation. Should you accept the money? A friend borrows a huge sum from another friend and shows no inclination to ever repay the debt. Should you remain his friend? Your college class requires you to report cheating. Is it wrong to refuse to cooperate? Ethical problems arise with such frequency in everyday life that the spate of books, columns, and talk-show advice-givers catering to our felt need for moral guidance should come as no surprise. One such enterprise, from which the questions above are derived, is Randy Cohen's weekly "The Ethicist" column for the *New York Times Magazine*. The book under review collects these columns in chapters on Civic Life, Family Life, Social Life, Commercial Life, Medical Life, Work Life, and School Life, each chapter preceded by a brief introductory essay. Cohen stresses that what is important about his answers to readers' queries is whether he succeeds in showing, in his words, "the rational determination of right conduct." Ethics is, according to Cohen, "an attempt to answer the question 'How should I act now?'" and as such requires the satisfaction of, and mediation among, a variety of values, including honesty, kindness, compassion, generosity, and fairness. This approach to ethics, we are told, "requires something like diplomacy among the competing principles. . . . It is ethics as problem solving." (p. 10) In Cohen's words, "I embrace actions that will increase the supply of human happiness, that will not contribute to human suffering, that are concordant with an egalitarian society, that will augment individual freedom, particularly freedom of thought and expression." (p. 10)

It would be uncharitable to demand that Cohen, who is not a philosopher, produce the kind of systematic justifications of our moral judgments that are characteristic of philosophical ethics, were it not for the fact that Cohen's self-professed claim to fame is that he does *not* have the specific training associated with these more exacting matters of moral reasoning. "[T]here is an unexpected advantage to my lack of formal training," he writes. "The reader must consider not my credentials but my argument, and be persuaded – or unpersuaded – by that." (p. 4). Very well: as a primer on "how to tell right from wrong," Cohen's book is a failure precisely because he lacks a systematic approach that would generate *principled* solutions to ethical problems. Many of the book's hapless interlocutors are in a state of moral bewilderment, and Cohen's frequently flippant responses, straining for humor while trying to remain "on message," merely compound the difficulties. Reason Papers 26 (Summer 2000): 89-94. Copyright © 2000

The introductory material that opens each of the book's chapters reveals a common rhetorical device, the less-than-innocent tactic of characterizing ideas with which one disagrees in disparaging terms. This device is employed whenever Cohen makes reference to conservative, libertarian, or religious ideas about morality, as when he writes of William Bennett's *The Book of Virtues*, "the values are Victorian and the tone is cranky nostalgia" (p. 14), or "The centrality of shopping is seen in the clash between those who cherish 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' and the 'life, liberty, and property' crowd." (p. 31). He succumbs to the fallacy of false alternatives, as when he writes: "*The Book of Virtues* is the champion of individual rectitude. 'The Ethicist' sees honorable behavior reflected in, affected by, and helping to bring about an honorable society." (p. 16). Surely these are not mutually exclusive. And he is not above the dismissive put-down, as in the case of the woman who has been telling outrageous lies to her ex-boyfriend about her name, age, looks, and profession in correspondence on an on-line dating service. The woman's roommate, who believes the ex-boyfriend is being deceived in a cruel way, asks for Cohen's recommendation. One would think that such behavior, involving as it does deception, manipulation, exploitation, and cruelty, would prompt a rather stern response, but Cohen's reply, in its entirety, is: "This is not an ethical crisis; it is the premise for a romantic comedy. I'd keep quiet. Except, talk to Meg Ryan's people." (p. 154). Such is the scope of our ethicist's "concern for actions that will not contribute to human suffering."

Although Cohen gives lip service to a high-mindedness that is reflected in the list of values above, his approach is not without controversy. The values Cohen invokes are independent, so the principles which give expression to them may come into conflict, and Cohen gives no indication how such conflicts should be resolved. Moreover, his apparent inconsistencies suggest he is out of his depth in the broader currents of ethical reasoning. This disability often leads to curious results. When a passenger on a bus can see that the woman sitting next to him is working on a special-education student's confidential evaluation form in full view, and wonders whether he should report this lapse in professional judgment, Cohen tells him he is "snooping" and should mind his own business. (p. 117). When a reader asks Cohen if it is wrong to watch a good-looking jogger in the adjacent apartment each night as he showers and prepares for bed, Cohen says "[E]njoy! It would be almost insulting to avert your glance." (p. 119) When corporate giant Wal-Mart refuses to carry stickered CD's and adult videos, Cohen accuses them of "allowing pressure groups to dictate what products they carry." But when Planned Parenthood prevails in getting Wal-Mart to carry contraceptives, Cohen notes favorably that Wal-Mart "has responded to its critics." (p. 45).

When a bank fails to correct an error in your favor, despite your repeated efforts to correct it, you must persevere: "The bank's error – no matter how persistent – does not justify theft." (p. 49). But when someone inadvertently takes your umbrella from a basket at the front of a store where

you have left it to dry, taking one of comparable quality that belongs to an innocent third party is “a kind of rough justice” (p. 134). And when a reader observes a charming woman in her seventies at the supermarket drop a box of cereal that has not been scanned into her bag and leave the store, Cohen calls this “a small crime against a big institution” and tells the reader she is being “afflicted with unwanted information” (p.48), but not what she should do.

When a reader wants to know how he should react to learning that his roommate has had sex with a girl from their school while in a drug-and-alcohol-induced stupor, Cohen tells him “the first thing you should consider are the wishes of the victim.” (p. 215), even though no accusations have been made, no charges have been filed, and his assistance has not been solicited. There follows a list of demands he should put to his roommate (Cohen calls him “the rapist”) -- he must be remorseful, ask for his victim’s forgiveness and look for a way to make amends, admit he has a problem and seek counseling -- as conditions for the continuation of the friendship. (p. 215). Whether this response is consistent with Cohen’s injunction in connection with another case that one has an “obligation not to abandon an intimate friend in a crisis” (p. 152) is unclear.

When a reader wonders whether he should remain friends with a man who borrowed \$10,000 from another friend and who shows no inclination of ever repaying the debt, Cohen replies that this is not a transgression grave enough to sink a friendship; that what it calls for is to “remind the defaulting friend of his obligation, gently but persistently, and make it clear that you do not condone his lapse.” (p. 156). Coming from someone who showed little reluctance to refer to “the rapist” and “the victim” and “the crime” before all the facts were in, as in the previous case, it is difficult to understand Cohen’s fastidiousness, his preference for “defaulting friend” instead of “deadbeat” and “lapse” instead of “fraud.”

When a police officer asks Cohen whether he must tell an inquiring spouse that her husband has been arrested for soliciting a prostitute, Cohen tells him he must tell the truth. (p. 131). When a man who has decided to break up with his girlfriend asks what he should do now that she has learned that her father is seriously ill, Cohen tells him he must put off telling her the truth. (p. 152). If your friends let their 4-year-old boy play naked when they visit you in the country, much to the discomfort of your 9-year-old boy, you should not confront them with the truth. (p. 155). If at dinner your neighbor says Grace in a way that seems appallingly sexist, there is no obligation to speak up or to remain silent. (p. 151). If you and your spouse are invited to a dinner party where one of the other guests is, in her opinion, a truly evil man, “go, but speak your mind.” (p. 154).

Perhaps the principles that are implicit in Cohen’s responses to all these cases constitute a consistent set, but it is impossible to determine this from Cohen’s sketchy accounts.

Turning to other instances of Cohen’s ethical judgment-making, we find further breakdowns in his ability to deal with ethical problems in a

principled and consistent way. Lacking a foundation in well-reasoned principles, Cohen is left with nothing but a situationist, seat-of-his-pants approach which yields some surprising results. The clearest examples of this shortcoming can be seen in connection with cases involving the obligations of friendship (as indicated above), dishonesty, and truth-telling. Should a university instructor who is told by two Russian-born students that a few Russian immigrants are admitted to both public and private universities and colleges by using false high school diplomas alert the admissions offices? Cohen says “I think you should keep this to yourself. . . . why is it a bad thing that these immigrants are so eager to attend college that they’d engage in deception to do so?” (p. 212). Cohen argues that “Their determination to pursue an education (although not, of course, their dishonesty) seems admirable,” evidently dismissing the idea that this determination is *furthered and facilitated* by their dishonesty. When a student applying to a graduate journalism program that requires an undergraduate GPA of 3.0 asks if she must disclose her 2.958 average, Cohen does not demur approving of her “rounding up” to a 3.0. “If they’d asked for a 3.00, then you’d have to express your grade as three digits, rounding it to a 2.96. You’d be rejected from journalism school and have to find an honest job.” (p. 217). But Cohen apparently doesn’t understand that scrupulousness in the handling of small details (especially by a would-be journalist) is precisely part of what it *means* to be honest.

When a full-time baby-sitter asks her employer if she may use her employer’s address to enroll her daughter in an excellent public school outside the sitter’s neighborhood, Cohen says that “using a false address should not be a first step but it could certainly be a last resort.” (p. 270). And why is that? Because “Given the current lamentable condition of public schools in New York, with the deck so stacked against this mother, her obligation to her child surpasses her obligation to tell the truth on an application form . . . That is, one does not have an ethical obligation to cooperate with an utterly unjust system.” (pp. 270-271). Questions of the slippery slope at once arise: Where, if at all, would Cohen draw the line? May this mother falsify her application for financial assistance for the sake of her child? May she inflate a resume to obtain a better job? And note, too, that what initially sounds like charity is actually a slide into evasion. Cohen says “While lying is always unfortunate, if it is the only way a hardworking mother can overcome injustice and get her child a good education, I do not have it in me to refuse her.” (p. 271). Cohen *does not have it in him* to refuse her, which is not *quite* to say that it is ethically permissible to lie, but most emphatically *not* to say that lying is *wrong*. He commits himself to saying no more than that lying *could be* a last resort, which is neither to rule it out nor to endorse it, and thus to leave the question unanswered.

But Cohen’s sympathy with the poor and his talent for glib jocularity cannot redeem his project. To take a final example, Cohen makes a spirited attempt to convince us that a man whose wife of two months will neither have

sexual intercourse with him nor disrobe in front of him, nor sleep in the same bed nor consult a therapist, should either masturbate or hire a prostitute or seek out a willing partner for an extramarital affair. (These steps are necessary to forestall divorce, since the wife, once divorced, might be deported back to China where the couple met.) This remarkable advice is offered with Cohen's assurance that "people have quite a variety of attitudes about their sex lives and that it is not at all unlikely that this man could find someone to sleep with him even under these odd circumstances." (p. 165). But Cohen does not explain why he thinks these extraordinary options are incumbent on a spouse who is willing to make a good-faith effort to deal with his wife's disturbing behavior, or why they are ethically preferable to divorce.

I said above that Cohen's book was a failure, but in one respect it is a ringing success. He manages to encompass nearly every element in the canon of left-liberal orthodoxy and placate every left-liberal interest group: there is the reproof of corporations and big business and the imputation of "racism" in every antagonism between members of different races. Indeed, when a non-Asian reader tells Cohen he is *attracted* to Asian women (and wants to date Asian women exclusively), Cohen calls this "racism" and insists that it is his ethical responsibility to "understand" his desires. (p. 162). Cohen thinks "we are all racists" (p. 163), but then defines racism as "being influenced by that construct called race," thereby unwittingly trivializing the notion of racism by emptying the term 'racist' of any normative content. There is the attack on the wealthy and the repudiation of "gated communities." There is the obsession with finding invidious hierarchies everywhere, from gift-giving ("a river of beneficence that runs downstream, from the more to the less powerful") (p. 147), to compliments ("While a science teacher may compliment her pupil on an experiment well done, it would be impertinent of the student to say, 'Nice teaching!' The etiquette governing such exchanges not only announces but reinforces the social positions of those involved.") (p. 148), to school life itself, which Cohen likens to Colonialism. ("The kids are the indigenous people . . . who must live under the rule of the far more powerful outsiders, the teachers.") (p. 204), a dubious analogy, since it might just as accurately be said that the children are the "outsiders" who come and go, while the career teachers and administrators sustain the structure of norms and traditions that make up "school life." And there are the *ad hominem* attacks: Those who reject Cohen's anti-free market polemics and vague environmentalist beliefs are "private property extremists" and "fanatics" who "espouse greed and relentless self-interest." (p. 31). As we now can see, these righteous absurdities are not simply the products of an excessive parochialism. They are indications of a pervasive bias never far from the surface. Every reference to corporations, business, the market, the military, capitalism and the free enterprise system is tendentious and derogatory. This ideologically-launched approach reaches a peak of vehemence in a passage on the causes of the prevalence of school cheating, where Cohen writes:

It's hard not to notice that kids born in the eighties are now of college age. They grew up under a president who emphasized self-interest at the expense of community, one who cultivated a goofy affection for cowboy fantasies of the autonomous individual who does not live among others, who denigrated public life as the machinations of wicked government. This is not a worldview apt to promote a sense of shared civic life with its concomitant sense of mutual responsibility. But, to be fair, it does promote capital gains cuts that benefit the wealthy, so things do balance out. (p. 205)

The irresponsibility of this malicious outburst is truly breathtaking. Cohen knows he has offered no evidence for the astonishing thesis that Ronald Reagan's own values were the source of widespread cheating, yet he evidently sees nothing wrong in speculating wildly about causes, attributing motives, and assigning blame. It is difficult to see how someone who thinks this is a responsible way to proceed in diagnosing our ethical malaise and providing ethical guidance is competent to discuss moral reasoning in the first place. For in addition to logical consistency, ethical competence requires a measure of impartiality, lack of rancor, and balanced judgment – features by no means in abundance in *The Good, The Bad & The Difference*.

Steven M. Sanders  
Bridgewater State College

Twight, Charlotte A. *Dependent on D.C.: The Rise of Federal Control Over the Lives of Ordinary Americans*. New York: Palgrave, 2002.

Consider the standard left-wing account of twentieth century American politics. Capitalism, we're told, is at root an efficient but amoral engine of wealth creation. Its efficiency, however ostensibly wonderful, merely disguises its deep moral failings—its conducivity to greed, its contribution to inequality, its failure to meet human needs. The basic function of a government is to remedy those failings, to use redistributive taxation, regulation and moral suasion to secure “the general welfare.” Naturally, the major obstacles to progress have come from those inscrutable right-wing folk who would put roadblocks in the way of an expansive and activist government. The basic task of politics is therefore to combat them.

This view of things is the reigning account of American politics, going uncontested in pedagogy, scholarship, the mass media, and everyday political discussion. In *Dependent on D.C.*, Charlotte A. Twight undertakes the daunting task of challenging it from a perspective that is practically its mirror-image. On her view, far from being the dominant agent of progress, the government (and especially the federal government) has by and large stood in the way of progress, and made us dependent on the barriers to progress it has set up. Nor has this been a matter of trading independence for just or efficient solutions to our problems; on the contrary, we have relinquished our independence from the government for compulsory dependence to it, getting nothing of comparable value in return.

*Dependent on D.C.* consists of a series of case studies describing how the federal government fostered dependency in the twentieth century, what the results were, and how it increased the costs of resistance to its policies to guarantee its possession of power. Twight begins the first two chapters with a brief synopsis of her basic assumptions. Her normative starting point is a classical liberal or libertarian political vision; her explanatory framework is that of Public Choice economics, which examines government action from the perspective of the self-interested (or apparently self-interested) motivations of its functionaries, principally legislators and bureaucrats. Chapters 3-8, the heart of the book, examine specific federal policies, arguing that the history of these policies can be explained by recourse to the same “universal tactic”: each policy began by fostering public dependence on the government while simultaneously raising the costs of resistance to such dependence, thereby entrenching the policies and making it impossible to escape from them. Chapter 9 ends simultaneously on a hortatory and pessimistic note, enjoining readers to resist government-fostered dependency, but predicting that few will successfully take up the challenge.

Reason Papers 26 (Summer 2000): 95-104. Copyright © 2000

*Dependent on D.C.* is in many respects an insightful and valuable book; its theme is certainly an important one, and its thesis is in many respects

true. American politics today is increasingly driven by the view that every problem that anyone ever faces in life—from the price of gas to the language used in the workplace—is the thin wedge of a larger “crisis that demands a massive and sustained federal response” (to paraphrase the Kerner Commission report). Two correlative assumptions stand behind this view of the world: (a) that freedom causes social problems, and (b) that force fixes them. Classical liberals often respond to this view of politics by engaging in laborious analyses of particular government policies, marshalling textbook economics to show that a given policy (say, the minimum wage) achieves the opposite of its stated intentions, and exacerbates whatever problem it was intended to solve. This piecemeal approach, while valuable in the most egregious cases, does little to challenge the more general assumptions about freedom and force that drive political discourse. Twight’s book provides the resources for that broader critique: her book aims to show its readers, both in detail and quite generally, not only that government is the source of certain large-scale problems, but how it became so. In my view, Twight makes her strongest case vis-à-vis Social Security (chapter 3), public education (chapter 5), and health care policy (chapter 6). Even cynical readers will be amazed at the sheer distance between the left-wing hagiographies invoked to justify these programs and the actual histories behind them.

The chapter on public education is perhaps the most convincing in the book. Mainstream political discourse proceeds from the assumption that public education is a necessary condition of universal literacy and numerosity, and that without it, these values would be impossible to achieve. The view is almost never argued for and almost never challenged, and thus enjoys the undeserved status of an axiom of social policy. Its axiomatic status protects public schooling from any fundamental criticism while also functioning to conceal the fact that while public schools today do a questionable job of imparting literacy or numerosity, they do a great job of inculcating students in the worldview of left-liberalism (136). Twight focuses on this latter issue—indoctrination—to present a refreshingly radical critique of public education.

“The fight over public education,” she writes, “has always been a fight over who will shape the minds and character of the next generation...In law if not in the hearts and minds of many American parents, the central government has emerged victorious in that protracted struggle” (133). The details emerge over the course of the chapter, as Twight shows us how, throughout the twentieth century, American public education has been driven by fads and trends formulated by political animals entirely out of touch with the realities of pedagogical life. More importantly, as the branch of the activist state most explicitly devoted to the dissemination of ideology, public schools have served as a remarkably effective way of subverting limited government. From an early age, students learn that government—and especially the federal government—is the principal guarantor of their well-being and the most important institution in society. Consequently, they learn to put their faith in it, whatever the status of “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance. Every well-



educated child today believes that racism and sexism require anti-discrimination laws, that diversity is an overridingly important social good, that we need the EPA to protect the environment, that equal access to health, education, and welfare are basic human rights, and that each of us owes a duty of service to “society.” By contrast, few are expected to learn the rudiments of a classical liberal conception of political economy, even as an antiquarian exercise, and few ever encounter one by happenstance. Naturally, such students are primed to support the mixed economy for the rest of their lives: totalitarianism aside, they can hardly imagine alternatives to it.

Anyone doubting this is invited to spend some time studying the most recent versions of the Civics, Geography, and U.S. History exams given by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) at the fourth-, eighth- and twelfth-grade levels (go to <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>). The exams reveal in detail what the federal government expects young people to know in each of those subjects at each of those grade levels—nothing radically left-wing, to be sure, but very almost nothing congenial to classical liberalism. In this respect, NAEP’s pedagogical expectations orbit comfortably around the Democratic-Republican consensus that governs our political life (leaning mostly to the Democratic side). Anyone who remains in doubt is invited to spend some time defending classical liberalism in the classrooms of America’s public schools. Such a person will quickly come to learn that the principal obstacle to defending classical liberalism in such a setting is the setting itself: it is extraordinarily difficult to convey the meaning of freedom to people who, having been subtly taught the “virtues” of redistribution and regulation for twelve years, unwittingly believe that their well-being depends on government largesse and control over the economy. Twilight is shrewd enough to see how public schools inculcate such beliefs, and courageous enough to attack them for it (all the more so because she’s biting the monopolistic hand that feeds her). She ends the chapter with a series of apt quotations from authors critical of government schools. The quotations from John Stuart Mill are especially apt: few people remember that Mill was home-schooled, and fewer still remember his criticisms in *On Liberty* of the very idea of public education.

The chapter on Social Security hits the spot as well. Mainstream debate on Social Security is driven by the assumption that the program deserves to exist; the consuming question for Republicans and Democrats alike is how to “save” it. To her credit, Twilight rejects this assumption, challenging the legitimacy of the program as such, and identifying the blatant (and characteristically middle-class) mendacity that lies behind it. In the simplest terms, Social Security is a welfare program for people who haven’t figured out that human beings eventually reach old age and must therefore find a way for providing for themselves when they can no longer work. To hide this altogether obvious fact from its beneficiaries—in other words, to give middle-class people a way of differentiating themselves from stereotypical welfare recipients—the government puts on a great show of making Social Security seem to be something that it obviously is not, namely, an insurance policy. But

as Twight points out, there's no such thing as an insurance policy that you don't voluntarily purchase, that you pay for but never own, and that was explicitly designed to supplant would-be competitors by force of law (72). Social Security is therefore not just a monumentally expensive middle-class welfare program, but one based on monopoly and fraud, and not just that, but a racket that has actively destroyed the foundations of a real market in old-age insurance.

Though I think Twight misses certain important dimensions of the health care debate—e.g., the ideological centrality of the idea of a *right* to health care—she does a good job in conveying the frankly totalitarian nature of contemporary health care policy. Her account of its rigid and irrational taxonomies (188-95, 215-218) and its criminalization of independent judgment (218-220) make for especially grim reading. One of the particular merits of her discussion is her astute observation that we are not currently headed toward “socialized medicine” but toward “a neutered private system” in which the government “will continue its systematic quest to capture control of our nominally private market system” (192). This insight, I think, is the key to virtually every health care problem we currently face (e.g., HMOs); I wish that Twight had given it more sustained attention.

Despite its undeniable strengths, I had some misgivings about *Dependent on D.C.* A first problem is the absence of any explicit account in the book of what Twight takes to be the proper function of government. The title of the book, as well as much of its text, seems to suggest that the sheer fact of being “dependent” on the federal government is in and of itself a bad thing. But unless we take the Articles of Confederation or anarchy as our model, that can't be right. The federal government is after all a legitimate institution, and if so, *some* degree of dependency on it is not just predictable but desirable. What's wrong is not dependency as such, but dependency of a certain kind. We would expect a careful writer, then, to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate forms of dependency on the government. Unfortunately, Twight fudges this issue: “I start with the premise, now embraced across a broad political spectrum by persons of widely divergent ideologies, that the federal government is today operating far outside the bounds of most people's concept” of its core functions (8). I doubt that any such consensus exists, and even if it did, I doubt that any majority of its members would find Twight's argument convincing. In any case, I find the strategy oddly circuitous. Twight's argument throughout the book proceeds from classical liberal political premises. Why not just admit that fact and proceed from there? A commitment to limited government is hardly something to hide.

This relatively theoretical point affects the plausibility of some of Twight's case studies. For instance, Twight devotes chapter 4 to a lengthy critique of federal income tax withholding, objecting to what she sees as its totalitarian methods. As she points out, federal income tax is withheld from our paychecks on an incremental basis, rather than being paid in a single lump

sum. If we pay taxes gradually, she suggests, we're more easily deceived into thinking that we're not actually paying anything at all, which makes it easier to part with the money.

I'm no fan of our tax system, but I don't buy this argument. For one thing, I don't see any significant difference between incremental withholding and a lump-sum payment. The fact is, if you ultimately have to pay  $x$  to the government, you're going to have to pay  $x$  whether you do so in one lump sum, or over a year's worth of withholdings. Either way, you pay. Moreover, I find Twight's argument psychologically implausible. Contrary to Twight, aren't we *more* apt to be conscious of the burdens of taxation if we see its results written out on our paychecks every two weeks? An annual lump-sum payment could be paid and forgotten each year, but it's harder to forget what happens every payday. Finally, Twight's analysis is politically implausible as well. Almost every political campaign in America is about lower taxes. Walter Mondale's ill-fated presidential campaign should be enough to convince us that higher taxes are not exactly the road to political success in America. So it's hard to believe that the transaction costs of reduced taxes are as high as Twight makes them out to be.

The problem with Twight's discussion of taxation, I think, is its misplaced sense of normative priorities. As Robert Nozick pointed out decades ago, the fundamental normative issue concerning taxation is not its method but its goal (Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, [New York: Basic Books, 1974], p. 27). And the basic cause for complaint against our tax system is not *how* we're taxed (or even *how much* we are), but *why* we are: what's objectionable is the fact that the system robs Peter to pay Paul, not that it robs Peter on a biweekly rather than annual basis. In the absence of any explicit account of the function of the state, Twight misses this crucial distinction, devoting too much space to issues of peripheral importance.

Problems also arise in Twight's discussion of law enforcement issues in chapter 7 of the book. The problem here is nicely described by Alexander Hamilton in *Federalist* #1:

An enlightened zeal for the energy and efficiency of government [is often] stigmatized as the offspring of a temper fond of despotic power and hostile to the principles of liberty...[It is often] forgotten that the vigor of government is essential to the security of liberty; that in the contemplation of a sound and well-informed judgment, their interests can never be separated.

Twight commits this fallacy in spades. She frequently writes, as too many libertarians do, as though law enforcement were a self-executing endeavor without significant demands of its own. From this perspective, a writer's only task is to criticize the blunders of law enforcement officials—never to look at the larger picture, and never to praise the government for getting anything right. Thus she rarely sees things from the perspective of government agents who have to enforce *legitimate* laws in the face of unscrupulous or dishonest citizens, focusing entirely on the evil that

government does when it enforces illegitimate laws. This is particularly the case when she discusses the topic of fraud. Reading her scathing remarks about government anti-fraud provisions, I found myself wondering whether Twight was criticizing the deficiencies of particular laws—or defending a citizen’s “right” to engage in dishonest financial transactions with impunity (103-4, 124, 238-9, 248-53). It bears repeating, perhaps, that a classical liberal government is one that prohibits both force *and* fraud.

Twight also has a tendency to write as though law enforcement officials were nothing but B-movie villains intent on violating rights at their whim and caprice. The most egregious example of this attitude is her treatment of the notorious incident at Waco, Texas in February-April 1993. The incident began on February 28, 1993, when members of the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF) attempted to serve a search warrant at the compound of a Seventh-Day Adventist religious order called “the Branch Davidians” on suspicion that the Davidians were in violation of federal weapons statutes. A shootout began as federal agents invaded the Davidians’ grounds and building; the shootout ended in stalemate, with four federal agents and six Davidians dead. A siege followed, during which the FBI replaced the BATF and took command of operations. After much fruitless negotiation between the FBI and the Branch Davidians, the FBI tear-gassed and demolished the Davidians’ compound, which simultaneously caught fire, killing 76 of its occupants (many of them children), and ending the siege. (The causes of the fire are vehemently disputed, but good evidence suggests that the Branch Davidians started it.) Eleven of the surviving Branch Davidians were put on trial for having fired on the BATF agents on the first day of the affair; they were all acquitted of murder, but eight were found guilty of a (confusing) variety of lesser charges. The trial was problematic at best, and it remains unclear who fired the first shot on February 28.

The Waco affair is a much-neglected event in modern American history, and we can agree with Twight that the government was guilty of considerable malfeasance on that occasion—malfeasance that bears further reflection and discussion than it’s gotten in the years since. But Twight isn’t content to rest there. There is, she writes, “overwhelming evidence” of “brutal government murder” at Waco (309). The Waco incident thereby becomes the modern-day equivalent of “the U.S. government’s treatment of Native Americans” in the nineteenth century. We’re therefore invited to infer that the federal government of the United States is a genocidal institution, guilty of vast crimes against humanity, and undeserving of the slightest shred of respect.

If the evidence for “mass murder” at Waco were really “overwhelming,” one would expect Twight to produce it right there in the text. After all, an accusation of murder against specific individuals—the FBI and BATF agents in charge of the Waco operation—is hardly the kind of thing that one can toss off without substantiation. But Twight offers nothing resembling substantiation, serving up the lame excuse that “no summary can convey” the evidence for her inflated claims. Such evidence as she does present is buried in

a footnote, and consists of one book and two films (404n.125). No one familiar with the material she cites there (or familiar with the facts) could possibly regard them as telling the whole story, much less as presenting “overwhelming evidence” of “mass murder.” To make matters worse, the book she cites explicitly *denies* that the evidence it presents is conclusive, and explicitly *denies* that the available evidence points to mass murder (David B. Kopel and Paul H. Blackman, *No More Wacos: What’s Wrong with Federal Law Enforcement and How to Fix It*, [Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1997], pp. 13 and 201-11, respectively.) Nor does Twilight mention the findings of Senator John Danforth’s “Final Report to the Deputy Attorney General” (2000) concerning the Waco affair, which takes detailed and explicit issue with the very charges she makes in her book (and with what is alleged in the films she cites). My point is not that Danforth’s report is unerringly right, but that Twilight’s failure to mention it, much less rebut it, is irresponsible. In fact, her handling of the Waco issue is problematic enough to create doubts about the book as a whole. If this is the way she handles Waco, one wonders, could she be taking similar liberties with facts elsewhere in the book? I hope not, but I can’t say for sure.

There is, finally, a deficiency in the book’s handling of the role of ideology in the making of public policy. As Twilight tells the story, ideological factors are an epiphenomenon of public policy rather than its driving force: they make an appearance only at the tail-end of the story. On her view, bad policies arise for reasons that don’t need explanation. Once they do arise, rent-seeking and power-lusting politicians manipulate the public into accepting these policies, raising the transaction costs of challenging and undoing them. Consequently, and at the tail end of this process, the public starts to receive the largesse from the policies, which puts the policies in a better light, and thereby breaks resistance to them.

This model leaves too much unexplained. For one thing, it fails to explain where the bad policies came from in the first place. Why *were* people receptive to public education, Social Security and national health care? Why weren’t these policies simply dismissed out of hand? Perhaps deception played a role. But if so, why were so many people fooled so much of the time? If liberty-minded politicians tried to resist the trend to government dependency, why was their resistance so ineffectual? In short, how can a whole country be deceived, bullied, and bamboozled so many times in so many ways for so long—but always by the same methods, and always for the same ends?

None of these questions can be answered if we stick ideological considerations at the end of the process as Twilight does, but they can in principle be answered if ideology is what got the process started in the first place. The truth about our push toward dependency, I think, is closer to Ayn Rand’s view of things than Twilight’s. Recall Rand’s memorable depiction of the demise of the Twentieth Century Company in *Atlas Shrugged*, in which workers were “convinced” (as best one could be) of the moral propriety of running their company by the principle “from each according to his ability, to

each according to his need.” The policy didn’t just come out of the blue; it arose from a specifically *moral* consensus about the priority of need to ability and desert.

Rand meant the *Atlas Shrugged* sequence as an allegory, but I think it works pretty well as history, too. For all of our vaunted “self-reliance,” Americans have often wanted to get something for nothing, and have been willing to pick their neighbors’ pockets to get it. This propensity took off not in the twentieth century but in the middle of the nineteenth, which is when dependency on the government received its real moral imprimatur (see chapter 6 of Leonard Peikoff, *The Ominous Parallels*, [New York: New American Library, 1982], and chapter 3 of David Kelley, *A Life of One’s Own*, [Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 1998]). The unpleasant truth is that Americans have traditionally been *willing* to be “deceived” by those who would make them dependent. The blame for dependency, then, can’t somehow be placed at the door of wily politicians who “fooled” those innocent babes, the American people. It has to be placed at the door of the millions of Americans who were willing to deceive themselves in order to muscle in on their neighbors’ liberty and property. To paraphrase a recent book title, when it comes to dependency, it takes a nation.

In this light, for all of its virtues, *Dependent on D.C.* strikes me as both overly cynical and overly naïve about politics. Twight’s cynicism about government blinds her to the possibility that (mistaken) moral idealism might genuinely have played a role in the rise of government dependency. As she sees it, *every* explanation of government action has to draw on the apparatus of Public Choice theory, appealing in every case to increased transaction costs, and focusing obsessively on the government’s imperative to amass power. Consequently, every government official becomes Machiavelli in disguise, and dirty tricks become the central explanatory factor behind virtually everything the government does. The claim is vastly overgeneralized, and not particularly believable. By reverse token, Twight’s naivete about the “self-reliance” of the American people in some bygone age blinds her to the possibility that there never was any such bygone age. One gets the impression that Twight simply cannot *believe* that the American people would have accepted government dependency if they’d known the real facts behind the programs that they voted for. But that raises the question of why they continue to accept it once the facts are in.

My overall assessment of this book is therefore mixed. On the one hand, Twight draws attention to crucial episodes in recent political history that ought to be more widely known and would otherwise have fallen by the wayside. On the other hand, the book contains significant flaws that undercut

its genuinely valuable message. In the end, however, I think the book's ratio of assets to liabilities makes it well worth reading. Whether it will change any minds remains to be seen.

Irfan Khawaja  
The College of New Jersey





*Nietzsche's Postmoralism: Essays on Nietzsche's Prelude to Philosophy's Future*, edited by Richard Schacht. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

All the essays in this volume, save the editor's, were presented at the conference, "Nietzsche's Philosophical Thought and its Contemporary Significance," at the University of Illinois Allerton in October, 1994. Schacht's essay was intended for the conference, but wasn't completed in time. In the introduction, Schacht claims that all the essays "have to do in one way or another with reconsiderations of Nietzsche's thinking and efforts relating to the two undeniably central tasks of his 'philosophy of the future' as he both preached and sought to practice it: (re-)interpretation and (re-)valuation." There are a couple of very interesting essays here (especially Schrift's and White's), as well as a couple of throw-aways (Soll's and Solomon's). Further, the picture of Nietzsche that arises from some of these works (most notably, Schacht's and Conant's) is unrecognizable. This is a Nietzsche who not only has had his teeth pulled, but who is nearly so bland, in line with traditional philosophy and "common-sensical" that one begins to wonder—if this is what he's *really* saying—why he's worth reading at all. Fortunately, this reading of Nietzsche is hardly more tenable than that of the Nazis or the most radical postmodernists.

In "Nietzsche on the Illusions of Everyday Experience," Ivan Soll traces Nietzsche's thinking about the appearance/reality distinction, a thing in itself, and our "distortion" of the world and everyday experience. He reports Nietzsche's eventual abandonment of a distinction between the world as we experience it and a "true" world in favor of the idea of the world as a flux and our constructions or distortions of that flux in order to be able to grasp and understand it. Oddly, Soll discusses this aspect of Nietzsche's work as if it were something terribly controversial, as if it took some act of deep interpretation, when it is in fact fairly plainly stated by Nietzsche himself.

In "Masters Without Substance," Rüdiger Bittner argues that there is a conflict between Nietzsche's denial of substance and his doctrine of will to power, since he equates will to power with something subduing something else, while both somethings certainly would seem to have to be substances. Bittner's solution is to jettison the idea of will to power, believing that it's not necessary in our understanding of life as activity.

Alan D. Schrift, in his interesting essay, "Rethinking the Subject: Or, How One Becomes-Other Than What One Is," discusses Nietzsche's profound influence on 20<sup>th</sup> century discussions and reevaluations of the subject, and suggests that by interpreting the concept of the *übermensch* through Nietzsche's becoming thesis we come to a richer understanding of Reason Papers 26 (Summer 2000): 105-108. Copyright © 2000

the subject: the *übermensch* is subject, but not as an ideal or a final product, but as the very process and activity of self-overcoming in which one's life consists.

Alan White argues that "The Youngest Virtue," *Redlichkeit*, cannot accurately be translated in Nietzsche's work as "honesty," and particularly not in the sense of truth-telling. It's best to keep in mind that the root of the word is "*reden*," German for "to speak or talk." The virtue consists in the realization that, since each individual thing is utterly unique, there's no possibility of seeing, understanding or naming something definitively. Consequently, as Nietzsche says, what a thing is called is of greater importance than what it is. The virtue, then, "requires insisting on the absence of utterly reliable stabilities or identities. But it requires as well denial that life in a world without instabilities must be horrible."

In "Morality as Psychology, Psychology as Morality: Nietzsche, Eros, and Clumsy Lovers," Robert B. Pippin discusses the way that Nietzsche exposes the motives behind religion, philosophy and morality, and that this sort of philosophical investigation Nietzsche calls "psychology." However, Pippin says, this drive for knowledge, according to Nietzsche, is itself evaluative. Like Plato, Nietzsche sees philosophy as erotic, as a desire for a possibly better life. However, unlike Plato (the way that Nietzsche reads him), for Nietzsche, while philosophy is erotic, the sophisticated lover of wisdom at the same time accepts the unstable ground and the transitory nature of existence and so doesn't demand respite from the anxiety and uncertainty of erotic attachment. Pippin thus uses Nietzsche's conception of philosophy as eros to understand better the latter's critiques of traditional religion, morality, metaphysics, etc.

In "On the Rejection of Morality: Bernard Williams's Debt to Nietzsche," Maudemarie Clark argues that in his earlier work, Williams is more indebted to Nietzsche than readers tend to realize, and that potential problems in Williams's work can be avoided if one reads him through Nietzsche: Specifically, Williams claims that obligation comes from without, from one's relations to other people and to society, while practical necessity comes from within, from one's identity and the goals which follow from that identity, and that morality, narrowly conceived, conflates these two. Clark argues that Williams might avoid the charge that "his critique of morality comes down to a merely verbal matter" by employing a Nietzschean reading of the distinction between obligation and practical necessity: that it is the same as Nietzsche's distinction in the *Genealogy* between the nonmoral phenomenon of guilt or debt and the self-evaluation (or condemnation) which is attached to that guilt in the moralization of that phenomenon.

In a weak and rambling essay, "Nietzsche's Virtues: A Personal Inquiry," Robert C. Solomon claims that Nietzsche, perhaps above all else, dispenses what might be called "moral advice" to his readers in an attempt to get them to change their lives. Solomon argues that this advice might be read as a kind of virtue ethics, and he goes on to list a number of virtues that are

presumably extolled in Nietzsche's writing. Further, he argues that the most important thing about Nietzsche is his approach to philosophy as a way of living a Socratic examined life, built around the virtues. Oddly, however, Solomon argues that it's not Nietzsche, the man himself—who was sickly and very observant of social graces—whom we ought to take as our model; but rather “Nietzsche,” the “philosopher-in-the-philosophy,” the “heroic” figure that Solomon believes Nietzsche is or made himself out to be in his writings. (As a side note, in his essay Solomon unforgivably claims that Plato defines justice as “giving each his due,” without so much as a word that this is a quickly rejected definition in the *Republic*, and not at all Plato's own definition.)

In his “Nietzschean Normativity,” Richard Schacht claims that Nietzsche has a positive moral philosophy, which “extended to nothing less than a fundamental reinterpretation of the general character of normativity,” though Schacht does hedge his bets by admitting that this isn't necessarily *exactly* Nietzsche's own view, but something towards which he was generally aiming. He argues against the common view of Nietzsche's thinking about values, that it was either radically individualistic or reductively biological or psychological. Instead, Schacht argues, all normativity is a produce of what he's calling “forms of life” (“various sorts of sociocultural formations and configurations—institutions, practices, endeavors, and the like...”). These forms of life have their natural biological roots, thus connecting us to our animal origins; but they are mostly “socio-cultural affairs” and thus take us beyond those animal origins. So “Values are engendered within the contexts of such forms of life, and develop with them; and morals...are fundamentally something like partial expressions of various conditions of the possibility of their...preservation, flourishing, growth and development...” If all this isn't controversial enough, then, Schacht claims that all of us—even the *Übermenschen* amongst us—are (for the most part) part of the herd and thus identify with and participate in the everyday herdish norms and moral life. “Higher humanity,” then, doesn't refer so much to great, heroic individuals, as to “a dimension of human possibility or ‘enhanced life’ transcending the commonplace...” Nietzsche's free spirit or his version of the great-souled individual isn't the amoral potential brute he's sometimes made out to be; rather, he's someone who's rooted in the community, but through value creation is able to transcend (briefly and momentarily) that community.

Last, in an almost stunning act of revisionism, James Conant, in his essay, “Nietzsche's Perfectionism: A Reading of *Schopenhauer as Educator*,” provides us with a Nietzsche I dare say none of us expected: a radically egalitarian, democratic Nietzsche, who believes that all of us have the capacity to be part of “higher humanity,” and who not only is not an immoralist (in the sense of abandoning morality and moral values in favor of, say, aesthetic values), but who believes that focusing on one's own character and development is (simply) “a prior condition of cultivating the capacity to recognize the moral needs of others.” Conant's focus is the early essay,

*Schopenhauer as Educator*, and—despite some very good argumentation and close textual analysis of this work—one can't help but get the feeling here that a) if there is even the merest suggestion of anything non-elitist and egalitarian in Nietzsche's work, that it appeared only in these earlier works (the other source Conant primarily points to is *Human, All Too Human*) and disappeared quickly thereafter (just like his adherence to a dualistic metaphysics); and/or b) Conant is as guilty as people like Rawls and Russell (whom he criticizes) of carefully picking and choosing his passages from Nietzsche's later works to support his reading.

Mark T. Conard  
Marymount Manhattan College