

The Virtue of Benevolence

By Carl Milsted, Jr.

“Hello, I am a Libertarian, and I am a jerk. Vote for me! It is in your rational self-interest! I support your right to be a jerk...”

Of course, the above is not an exact quote. It is merely the meaning that many (most?) people hear when exposed to certain rhetoric of a “philosophical nature”.

Not all libertarians take this tack, of course. But the Objectivist roots of the modern libertarian movement run deep, and Randian rhetoric permeates much libertarian propaganda. It is tempting to put Ayn Rand’s novels or essays into the hands of prospects. After all, Ayn Rand wrote some of the most powerful and brilliant defenses of the free market in print. Her attacks on socialists and angst-worshippers are scathingly witty and dead-on. Yet associating libertarianism with her writings is a grave error, for they contain a fatal flaw.

In the fluffy realm of common sense and conservative perturbations of the status quo, errors in analysis are mercifully bounded. Frequent resort to empiricism over perfection of logical consistency provides an error correcting mechanism in even muddle-headed thinking. In the stark realm of pure philosophy, however, where all reality must conform to a few axioms, life is far less forgiving. A single error can cause a fissure through an entire logical edifice, rendering it unfit. Ayn Rand’s basing her moral philosophy on following one’s own rational self-interest is one such devastating error. Its consequences are so serious that the association of Objectivism with the libertarian movement has produced a taint that is a major barrier to the libertarian movement’s general acceptance -- possibly the biggest. Consider:

- Those who understand how government really works know that to significantly cut government requires self-sacrifice. Rational self-interest on the part of the governors means to take the money and rule.
- Even the politically ignorant know this to a degree. Indeed, they often ignore the issues at hand and vote for candidates on the basis of “character”.
- People are most receptive to new ideologies at the beginning of adulthood. This is a time of starry-eyed idealism and desire to “make a difference” in the world. The Socialists and Greens tap into this. Objectivism tries to quell it.
- Then there are the religious (still a large number!):

Hello, I am a Libertarian and I am going to Hell. Vote for me! I will cut your taxes and increase economic growth. But I would like you to stop following “witch doctors” and worrying about that nonexistent afterlife...

A Grand Opportunity

By identifying this error we open a golden opportunity for the libertarian movement. Here is a fix that can be done completely by those already active in the movement. It is not dependent upon a change in FEC rules, the alignment of the press. It does not require a jump in the membership size of the LP. It does not require a celebrity candidate to run for president as a Libertarian. Fixing this error is completely within the control of existing libertarians. And once it is fixed, some of these other good nice changes will come to pass.

In the introduction, I made the somewhat audacious claim that the rhetoric of self-interest is possibly *the* biggest barrier to the growth of the libertarian movement (and of the Libertarian Party). While his claim cannot be proven without changing the rhetoric and observing what happens, it is worth observing how well other fringe parties did while being faced with the same obstacles faced by the Libertarian Party. Despite being around longer, better organized and having a more coherent ideology than certain other “third” parties, the Libertarian Party fielded a presidential candidate that came in *fifth* in 2000. True, the Reform candidate had a big glop of federal welfare money to play with, but still. We got clobbered by the Greens, who have the same fundraising hurdles as the LP and more ballot access struggles.

Could it be that the LP platform is too radical? This is part of the problem, but look at the Green platform! Listen to other environmental movement organizations. Look at the platforms of the socialist movements worldwide! Recall the rhetoric of Paul Wellstone. Radical can be selling point.

Is it because libertarian ideology is too complicated or abstract? More complicated than Hegelian philosophy? Marxism? Existentialism? Keynesian economics? Theoretical meteorology (global warming)?

Is it the Federal Election Commission? If so, how did the Greens do so much better than the LP has ever done? Why hasn't the LP done better at the state house level, where federal regulations do not apply? There are states with *no* limitations on donation sizes from wealthy donors. Throw in the fact that the amount of money required to run a first-rate state house race in a small to medium sized state is *a thousand times less* than for U.S. president. If there were a group of generous multi-millionaires eager to fund winning Libertarian campaigns, they could do so under current rules.

Perhaps it is a conspiracy. The major network news people, in conjunction with the Actor's Guild, various charitable foundations, the Bavarian Illuminati and the UFOs is out to prevent the libertarian movement from gaining a foothold. There is some evidence here, but why is it here? Why should such a large number of well-intentioned people support our enemies? Could it be that they like other people to be well-intentioned?

The socialists invoke the noble intention of helping the poor. The religious right invokes obedience to the Creator. Environmental activists invoke saving cute and interesting species, and ensuring that the planet is still interesting (or even habitable!) for our grandchildren. All very noble sounding, even if the proposed programs from these groups will fail to accomplish their stated objectives.

Meanwhile, many libertarians say: do your own thing as long as it doesn't hurt others. The fact that freedom will solve many of the above problems is merely a convenient side effect. As for Objectivists, they are on the record as saying that altruism is evil.

Are the Masses That Stupid?

The Objectivist response would be that the masses are wrong in their distrust of politicians speaking the language of self-interest. Therefore, it is critical to teach them philosophy before getting around to politics.

After all, the aversion to self-interest comes from some mistakes made in Western philosophy that lead to Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative. Kant's arguments were then taught in philosophy departments and then popularized by lesser philosophers. Political, economic, educational and moral practitioners at various levels taught this lesson to the masses until even skid row bums were speaking the language of altruism.

Then again, before Kant, we had the tag team duo of "Atilla and the Witch Doctor" using might and mysticism to brainwash most people throughout most of history into an unnatural hatred of selfishness. Truly an amazing conspiracy!

And utter nonsense!

A distrust of selfishness is learned on the playground, when playing with a "ball hog", a rulebook nitpicker or an outright cheater. It is learned at the kitchen table while fighting over the last cookie. It is learned in the den while fighting over which channel to watch. It is learned while standing in line when some brat decides to cut in front. No philosophy, or even literacy, is necessary to give selfishness a bad name. These lessons are relevant. International relations is simply child's play with nuclear weapons thrown in for fun.

Of course, Objectivists and related philosophers advocate only "rational" self-interest. Being a jerk is often only valuable in the short term. Once people know you are a jerk, they will refuse to deal with you and the net benefit is negative. Thus, a certain level of fair play and even benevolence in personal relations is in your long-term self-interest.

For economic relations, the coincidence between benevolence to others and self-interest is very strong *under a free market economy*. However, even with a free market, the exceptions are not trivial! And one does not need to look up "externality" or "public good" in an economics textbook to figure this out. Examples abound in the real world.

Go to a car dealership and experience all the lies, mind games and pressure tactics for a few hours and then tell me rational self-interest is always an honorable thing under a capitalist system. Listen to a pitch for timeshare condominiums. Go to the electronics store and be sold an overpriced service contract, or have the salesperson point to the first stereo your eyes focus on when you ask for advice. Or, better yet, investigate the range of audiophile equipment available with an impressive array of ridiculously expensive engineering features, few of which produce an audible improvement in the sound. Look at the ads in a cheesy tabloid,

or in the back of many magazines. Look at the moral crud served up in television or the movies. Look at the slanting of the news. Look at the spam in your mailbox!

These are all profitable activities – rational self-interest under a largely capitalist system.

Under a mixed economy, rational self-interest can include a wide variety of forms of legalized theft. Under other political/economic systems, rational self-interest can motivate such behaviors as owning and torturing slaves, turning neighbors in to the secret police, killing siblings to get an inheritance and other loathsome activities.

Acquiring and maintaining a free society *requires* many altruistic actions. While it is in the self-interest of most to live in a fair free-market society, lobbying for and acquiring special exceptions can be very profitable to the few. Living during a witch hunt is dangerous, but being the first to denounce it is even more so. Ditto for living under a communist or fascist regime. Slavery pulls down an economy, but being the first slave owner to release his slaves is to take a huge economic hit. If Libertarians were to gain political power, nearly everyone would benefit. However, those who get in early to build up the Libertarian Party to the point where it can get into power, will generally spend far more of their time and treasure attaining increased liberty than they will get back when increased liberty is achieved. And they pay these costs not knowing when or whether their efforts will bear fruit.

Only those who jump on the Libertarian bandwagon at the latter stages can even remotely be thought of as acting in their rational self-interest. Liberty requires some self-sacrifice.

Indeed, the current activists within the Libertarian Party perform levels of self-sacrifice that would put many self-styled altruists to shame. This includes many Libertarians who consider themselves Objectivists to one degree or another. Even the fictional heroes in *Atlas Shrugged* committed extraordinary acts of altruism – consider Francisco D'Anconia blowing the family pretending to be a playboy *while remaining celibate* -- all in the name of rational self-interest!

Why not take credit for sacrifices made? Why not shout across the airwaves that evil selfishness is the enemy of a free market? Why not bask in the praise of emotion-driven Hollywood celebrities and members of the media? Why not make a positive first impression as soon as one's speech begins, instead of spending most of the time digging out of a hole? Why shouldn't we have our own style of young hippies having rallies on college campuses and in front of government buildings?

Two False Dichotomies

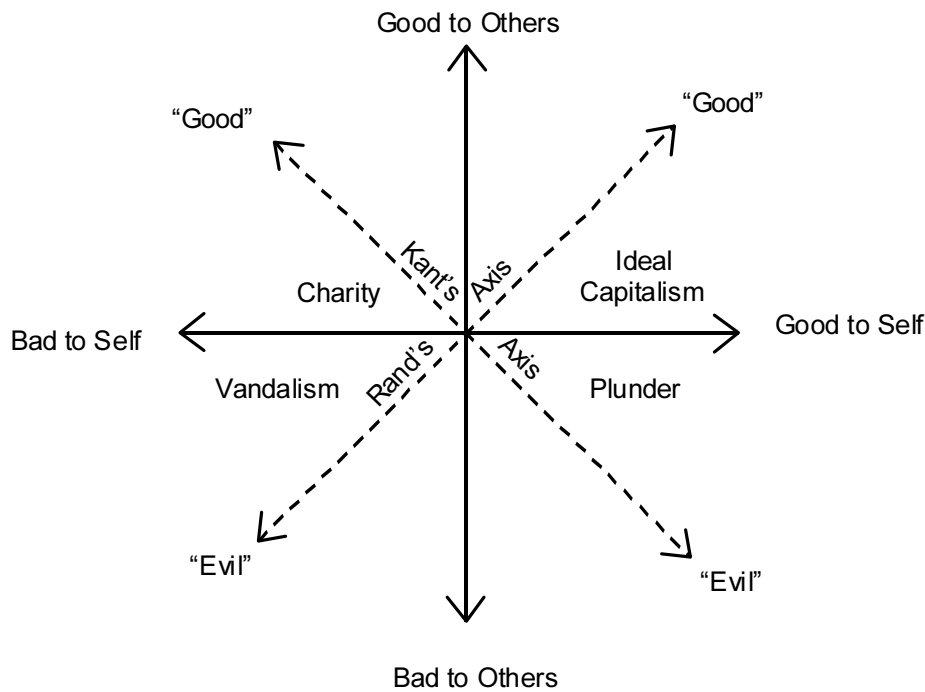
Perhaps the reason is because freedom and self-interest go together. After all, if people are free, they will do what they want to do, almost by definition.

And this is where Ayn Rand was right. If the fulfillment of desire is evil, then oppression is good. Communism is the best form of oppression because nobody benefits. Pol Pot, Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler are true Kantian heroes.

Kant's Categorical Imperative is a piece of philosophical trash, worthy of attack. If selflessness is the only measure of morality, then charity is half evil! The giving away of wealth is "good", but receiving it is not. Better to be a malevolent altruist under this picture.

However, not all altruists fit the Kantian ideal, by any stretch. (And even Kant shied away from the logical implications of his philosophy, even as he expounded it.) Ayn Rand did a great deal of stereotyping, just as the Marxists and other angst-worshippers lump all self-interested acts (such as honest capitalism and slave-holding) together.

To break this stereotyping, it is necessary to note that selfishness *vs.* selflessness and benevolence *vs.* malevolence are orthogonal concepts.



In the Kantian world view (ignoring the full logical consequences of the categorical imperative), "good" is epitomized by acts of charity that impose a great cost on the giver (upper left quadrant). Evil is epitomized by those selfish acts that do harm to others (lower right), such as holding a feudal estate, stealing, looting, slaving, subsidy mooching and so on. This worldview had more merit in an age when most wealth was held in the form of slaves and conquered lands. A good many of the self-interested acts, were indeed malevolent.

However, this picture is flawed as Adam Smith famously pointed out. Most good deeds to others are done in the context of trade (upper right quadrant), not charity. This is true even in a mixed economy. However, there are a significant number of needed benevolent deeds that cannot be performed at a profit (including building the Libertarian Party!). These deeds merit special praise and divine reward

because they are not already rewarded, not because they are the only deeds that are worthy.

Ayn Rand also had a point in casting malevolent altruism (lower left quadrant) as the purest form of evil. After all, this is evil for evil's sake. But Rand was by no means the only writer of her era to attack evil altruists. C. S. Lewis attacked many of the same philosophical and artistic trends. Indeed, the villains in *That Hideous Strength* bear a strong resemblance to those in *Atlas Shrugged*. However, Lewis had a strong grasp of the orthogonality of benevolence and self-sacrifice. Consider this passage from *The Screwtape Letters* (the letter writer is a senior devil coaching a junior on the art of temptation) [26th letter]:

The grand problem is that of "Unselfishness." Note, once again, the admirable work of our Philological Arm in substituting the negative Unselfishness for the Enemy's positive Charity. Thanks to this you can, from the very outset, teach a man to surrender benefits not that others may be happy in having them but that he may be unselfish in forgoing them.

Or from later in the same letter:

A sensible human once said, "If people knew how much ill-feeling Unselfishness occasions, it would not be so often recommended from the pulpit"; and again, "She's the sort of woman who lives for others – you can always tell the others by their hunted expressions."

C. S. Lewis was able to glorify charity while at the same time glorifying pleasure. Once again, from *The Screwtape Letters* [9th letter].

Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden. Hence we always try to work away from the natural condition of any pleasure to that in which it is least natural, least redolent of its Maker, and least pleasurable. An ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure is the formula. It is more certain; and it's better *style*. To get the man's soul and give him *nothing* in return – that is what really gladdens Our Father's heart.

This strikes me as rather good material to put before a drug warrior, especially one who is nominally Christian. There are many other passages in Lewis' fiction speaking well of pleasure. Indeed, Lewis' vision of pleasure strikes me as a lot more fun than Rand's rational self-interest.

Conclusion

The libertarian movement is, of course, not identical with the Objectivist movement. The language of self-sacrifice is used at times in a libertarian context – especially in Libertarian Party fundraising letters. It is also used by some LP candidates.

However, the full potential has not been tapped. The media still thinks of us as a bunch of cheapskates who do not want to pay our fair share of support for the needy. The Objectivist rhetoric is still used on many occasions and is remembered by our detractors from earlier occasions.

The crowd of tie-dyed young activists let loose as the Libertarian candidate took the stage at the huge rally. “Hello, I am a Libertarian, and I have given up a great deal of my time and my bank account to win this election, not because I get my jollies wielding power – nay, the prospect of attending Congressional hearings is one I dread greatly! I have done this because I care about my country! I care about those who languish in prison unnecessarily! I care about the poor children in this country who have to go to dangerous and ineffective government schools! I care about the endangered animals that are being lost to ‘shoot, shovel and shut up!’ I care...”