

EGOISM AND BENEVOLENCE

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Unrugged Individualism: The Selfish Basis of Benevolence

David Kelley

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65 pp.

Sometimes little books should have been big books, not because as little books they were unimportant but because they could have been so much more important as big ones.

Unrugged Individualism: The Selfish Basis of Benevolence aims to address a concern associated with the Objectivist ethics as presented in Ayn Rand's non-fiction essays. As David Kelley explains: "The author of *The Fountainhead* and of *Atlas Shrugged* clearly regarded benevolence as a positive trait, an element in the proper relationship among men" (2). However, Kelley observes, "the author of 'The Objectivist Ethics,' and of other essays that presented the moral code of Objectivism in nonfiction terms, never gave this trait the kind of emphasis and attention she devoted to virtues like rationality, productiveness, and justice" (2).

In this very well-written work, Kelley provides succinct discussions of some very fine topics, including tribalism, the varieties of possible ethical relations with other persons, emergency ethics, and so forth. But he often touches on many of these vital topics in too cursory a fashion. Mostly he whets one's appetite for a much more elaborate, developed treatment. One may suppose that this is due to Kelley's belief that he is dealing with a rather technical issue of Objectivism, unlikely to attract a wider audience if presented at large.

There is a widespread perception about the ethical egoism of Objectivism to the effect that the benevolent virtues—which Kelley identifies as civility, sensitivity, and generosity—as well as the more derivative attitudes of compassion, kindness, sympathy and empathy are

foreign to that system. It is also thought that for such virtues and attitudes to be appreciated and given a prominent enough place in human life, one must embrace some version of ethical altruism.

Kelley's work aims to argue that Rand's Objectivist ethics of egoism is not only compatible with but has a prominent place for the benevolent virtues; that altruism—as Rand and, especially, Nathaniel Branden have argued—is actually inhospitable to bona fide benevolence, and that only in the kind of robust ethical egoism Rand identifies for us can one make consistent and complete sense of these virtues.

Although Kelley makes a credible case—showing that, in Rand's fiction, there is ample and serious room for benevolence (as when Roark goes to see Steven Mallory in *The Fountainhead* and when Dagny Taggart in *Atlas Shrugged* helps the tramp remain on a train from which he was to be ejected)—he does not discuss ethical egoism in sufficient detail to show, also, that this system has a good chance of being sound and that it makes ample and prominent room for the benevolent virtues.

Kelley's choice of topics is certainly commendable. Following the Introduction there are brief but insightful chapters on "Benevolence and altruism," "Benevolence and the 'benevolent universe' premise," "The analysis of virtues," "The values at which benevolence aims," "The facts on which benevolence is based," "Benevolence and productiveness," and "Civility, sensitivity, and generosity." The conclusion is followed by a very poignant little appendix on tolerance, a kind of supplement to Kelley's earlier published essay, "Truth and Toleration." He manages to capture the ebb and flow of decent human relations and pinpoints real problems in contemporary views of ethical principles. For example, in a stellar passage on tribalism, Kelley writes:

In numerous ways, as Ayn Rand observed, the anti-conceptual mentality breeds an identification with and dependence upon the group, usually a group united by such concrete traits as race, sex, or geographical proximity. The moral universe of such people is constituted by concrete substitutes for ethical principles: customs, traditions, myths, rituals, and the like. Those who belong to different tribes, with different concretes, are naturally regarded with suspicion at best. The anti-conceptual mentality

is incapable of abstracting from concrete differences among people and formulating general principles of common human rights, or common standards of judging an individual's moral character and conduct. Its sense of right and wrong is anchored not in reality but in loyalty to the tribe and its practices; the solidarity of the tribe is sustained in part by hostility toward outsiders. (56)

This is an especially good point in this era of reemerging collectivism, via communitarianism and anti-universalism in much of political theory as well as substantial Balkanization in many regions of the world. On the one hand, we have globalization, which seems to follow the understanding that there exists a human nature all of us share and from which certain basic principles of political economy flow. On the other hand, we have very prominent theorists claiming that no basis for universal principles of politics is available to us. I believe, however, that with a more substantial development of several of the monograph's ideas, Kelley would have been able to interest readers outside the narrow circle of Objectivists and neo-Objectivists. He would have helped establish the Objectivist ethics as a serious contender among ethical theories by integrating the issue of benevolent virtues with a wider concern about the nature of altruism, ethical egoism—including act versus rule egoism—and even the nature of morality itself.

In this regard, Kelley's scholarship, his dealing explicitly with sources and references and the input of others who discuss his topics, is minimal. If one wants to defend ethical egoism against the charge that it fosters less than a benevolent attitude on the part of those who would adopt it as their guiding moral system in life, one needs to explain, for example, what ethical egoism comes to. Kelley should have taken up some of the criticisms of ethical egoism circulating in the literature of moral philosophy. For example, James Rachels has not only dismissed the view but used Rand to do so—in my opinion very unjustly. Kelley's treatment would have benefitted a great deal by making reference to discussions such as Rachels'. It would have been a way to usher in a fuller examination of the position.

Kelley's analysis of altruism is especially astute but it could have been

bolstered by supporting quotations from other sources. For instance, W. G. Maclagan (1954) states: "Altruism' [is] assuming a duty to relieve the distress and promote the happiness of our fellows. . . . Altruism is to . . . maintain quite simply that a man may and should discount altogether his own pleasure or happiness as such when he is deciding what course of action to pursue" (109-10). Maclagan is one scholar among others who backs up Kelley as against those many and overly confident critics of Rand who have argued that she mischaracterizes altruism when she claims that it involves a policy of genuine self-sacrifice.

Among classical discussions, it is, of course, August Comte who best illustrates the validity of Rand's understanding of the doctrine. Indeed, self-sacrifice—discounting altogether one's own pleasure or happiness as such—is exactly what altruism demands of human beings. Any reading of August Comte, in the classic literature, and Peter Singer's and Peter Unger's contemporary writings in ethics would also suffice to support Rand's position on what altruism means for most moral philosophers who defend it.

Nevertheless, it is also true that many of those who speak favorably of altruistic behavior—for example, in the social sciences and psychology—do not mean to endorse an ethical system of self-sacrifice but merely champion some overabundance of ordinary benevolence. Still, when we are discussing philosophical ethics, Rand and Kelley are right about altruism. Altruism is an ethical system, as are hedonism, egoism, utilitarianism, eudaimonism, Stoicism and others. All these are characterized by a fundamental principle, virtue or value. Usually this fundamental principle is shown to account for the ordinary moral precepts and to rank them in some order of priority. In altruism, it would be held that such virtues as courage, prudence, honesty, generosity and so on are all justified by their contribution to the well being of other—usually needy—persons. (In hedonism, the same virtues in some other ranking would be held to contribute to the amassing of personal pleasure, in utilitarianism to the greatest satisfaction of the greatest number, and so on.)

Rand and Kelley and other Objectivists are right, then, to construe altruism as an ethical system that, among other things, claims that the correct ethics requires self-sacrifice or, to use Maclagan's words, "that a

man may and should discount altogether his own pleasure or happiness as such when he is deciding what course of action to pursue" (Maclagan 1954, 109). Moreover, a great many moral theorists entirely discount the idea that ethics or morality pertains to how a person ought to act. They maintain, instead, that what these pertain to is how one ought to act toward others.

One reason behind this lopsided view of ethics may be the presence of the doctrine of Original Sin or fundamental, crass selfishness in many theological and philosophical positions on human nature. Christianity, for example, construes human beings as tilted toward evil at birth, while Thomas Hobbes held that in the state of nature everyone exercises his will to strive for self-preservation. Morality and altruism, in particular, are the means by which such built-in, natural selfishness is tamed.¹

Since Rand sees us as possessing free will and lacking any built-in tendency toward either goodness or evil, she has no sympathy toward this understanding of morality and defense of altruism. She endorses, instead, the ancient Greek conception of morality—or, rather, ethics—which had the role of guiding one to human flourishing or excellence ("survival qua man"). Where she differs from the Greeks is in her emphatically individualist conception of human nature. In some ancient Greek ethics, the goal of the good life is seen as support of the polis or public good, something that is difficult to translate into an individualist ethical project. (But there is disagreement about this: some argue that all one needs is to conceive of the human individual in broad enough terms to render the ancient Greek position egoistic.²)

It is too bad Kelley's work will probably not be read by either Richard Rorty or John N. Gray. Rorty—who, by the way, was Kelley's dissertation advisor at Princeton University—is what might be called a communitarian or solidarist who has written, among many other things, that human rights are myths, that truth is tied to the standards set by one's community and that democracy trumps philosophy as a decision procedure on all important fronts thought to be the province of philosophy (human nature, truth, justice, what have you). Gray, who used to toy with classical liberalism and has written pretty good books on Mill and Hayek, has become a champion of parochialism, anti-universalism, anti-liberalism (of the classical sort), and anti-individualism. Both are epistemological

pyrrhonists. If Kelley had developed many of his insights into a more thorough treatment, I believe that the work could have been a serious antidote to Rorty's and Gray's very influential positions in various areas of philosophy and political theory.

One issue that has bothered many very sympathetic readers of Rand's ethical works is only touched upon by Kelley. It deserves to be examined more directly, even in a work as brief as this. It is the issue of just what kind of "self-interest" Rand has in mind in her ethical writings.

On the one hand, Kelley writes, at times, as if Rand's ethical egoism might be of the act-egoist variety. In that system, one needs to establish, on each occasion on which one sets out to do something, that one's action has the greatest likelihood of securing for oneself greater benefits than harms. For example, if I decide to write a review of Kelley's book, as an act-egoist, I must make sure that to the best of my understanding of my own life, this will be of the greatest benefit for me as compared with anything else I might do.

Kelley at one point writes: "A commitment to one's own life and happiness, Rand observed, is a full-time job. Any action not serving that end is at least a mild form of self-sacrifice, a use of our time and effort for things that do not benefit us, or that provide a lesser benefit than we might obtain by other uses of our resources" (7). This clearly suggests act-egoism as the correct action-guiding policy in the Objectivist ethics. He also writes that "Objectivism holds that the agent should be the ultimate intended beneficiary of his own actions, helping others only when their good is a means to his own, or an ingredient in it (a constitutive means), as in a close personal relationship" (7). This, too, seems to propose that virtues, including the benevolent ones, must be instruments used to achieve one's greatest good. Here is how this way of understanding ethical egoism influences Kelley's discussion of the benevolent virtues: "When I treat others benevolently, I convey to them that I do not see them as threats or as prey, whose success must come at my expense, but as potential allies from whom I seek opportunities for mutual gain" (30). The kind of gain at issue, though, may mediate my point. Still, when we speak of gain, we tend to have in mind some numerable or quantifiable amount of material and in this context that suggests that the best life is one that ends with the most of something

rather than with the attribute excellence or flourishing.

On the other hand, we also have Rand's understanding of ethics or morality per se as something human beings need to become happy, to flourish in their lives. When so viewed, ethics by its very nature must be egoistic and the virtues, of whatever type, if practiced conscientiously, would necessarily be ways through which their lives would be enhanced, made excellent or flourish. It would not be necessary to engage in constant calculation of cost and benefits as one carries on with one's life because having cultivated the virtues of rationality, productiveness, pride, honesty, generosity, courage, and so forth would, for the most part, achieve the goal of guiding one to a happy life. In some cases, of course, the nearly habituated ways of virtuous conduct would have to be supplemented by a special rational focus—because, after all, the context of a situation may be unique enough so that we wouldn't be able to just trust our second nature and act right automatically. But, still, we would not need to figure out bit by bit whether this or that thing we do serves our best interest. Instead, our way of life would provide us with the most effective means to that end.

By my own reading there is no decisive choice between what we might call act and rule egoism in Rand's own works. Nor has Kelley managed to settle the issue, at least to my own satisfaction. While he seems to lean toward the act-egoist position in many places in *Unrugged Individualism*, he also suggests the rule-egoist alternative (as when he champions civility as, in part, "the disposition to look for peaceful and productive resolutions of disputes" [37], never mind if one is going to end up with a net benefit after such resolutions).

I wish to end my review with a reminder that—in philosophical work as elsewhere—the final product, even when it is as universally right as it can be, contains much that is idiosyncratic. Kelley, for example, has his own unique way of putting things, even though he learned his lessons from Rand as have many others who find what he says eminently congenial. Still, others who basically see the soundness of Rand's teaching may have a slightly different way of expressing the very same ideas Rand and Kelley champion and defend so admirably.

I, for instance, would not say, as Kelley does, that "productiveness is entailed by the principle of rationality," because I am concerned that this

may give a false impression of the precise relationship between these two virtues—entailment is often viewed as a strictly logical, formal one. But someone like Kelley, for instance, may use the term “entail” in a more informal way.

Such an element of idiosyncratic difference among thinkers with fundamentally identical positions must, I think, be appreciated in order to make progress in the discussion of philosophical issues and not get derailed by means of trivial controversies. I suspect, actually, that many philosophical differences could be seen in less divisive ways if we factored in this element of what might be called linguistic individuality.

The upshot of the above is that when reading Kelley’s monograph, the reader might just set aside some of the ways he or she has integrated and made sense of the Objectivist ethics and pay attention more to the full spirit of the argument, not to Kelley’s or even Rand’s unique terminology in its formulation.

Often, indeed, critics of individualism charge that this position tends to encourage unnecessary isolation among people. That may be true and can be seen rather clearly in how many individualist thinkers insist on putting points they share in just exactly their own fashion, thus encouraging—often quite successfully—unnecessary disputes. Still, the harm done by this is nowhere near as great as what comes from inflicting collectivist ideas and ideals on humanity, in the name of which policies and attitudes, far worse than a bit of isolation or the occasionally misplaced “atomism,” tend to emerge.

It is to Kelley’s credit to have produced a short volume that goes some distance toward discouraging the rugged individualism that tends to lead individualists astray, even as they attempt to establish their case for their philosophical stance. He also provides readers with many insightful gems that could encourage very good work in philosophical ethics, cultural anthropology and even political sociology. I only wish he had done this in a more developed work, one that would have had a better chance of reaching the broader philosophical community.

Notes

1. For another discussion of the prominence of this lopsided view, see Falk 1963.

2. Arguably, Rand did not consistently apply individualism to her own romantic life—if we are to judge by Barbara Branden’s report of Rand’s insistence that Nathaniel Branden love her for her mind and her virtues. See B. Branden 1986.

References

- Branden, Barbara. 1986. *The Passion of Ayn Rand*. New York: Doubleday.
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