

Books

**Individualist Ethics and
the Welfare State**

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A Life of One's Own: Individual Rights and the Welfare State
David Kelley
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Objectivism has long held that principles and practice are in harmony and that moral principles can guide both the personal and the political realm. The title of David Kelley's book, *A Life of One's Own*, conveys a meaning with both political and moral significance. As an argument against the welfare state, presumably "a life of one's own" will be what we are left with should we manage to clear away political interferences. Having one's life be one's own seems also to be something of a morally good thing. Moreover, if one's life is one's own in both senses, we presumably have moral and political well-being. There is no disharmony between ethics and politics in the sense that the ethical or political good are inherently in conflict with one another. Indeed, the suggestion is that the two senses of having a life of one's own (LOO) are naturally suited to each other.

Yet, could we have a LOO politically and not morally? Do political LOOs encourage moral ones, or does the failure on the part of many people to live moral LOOs diminish significantly the likelihood of the political form of LOOs?

The nonpolitical or uniquely ethical sorts of issues connected to living a LOO are not the main subject of this book. As the subtitle suggests, the book is about "individual rights and the welfare state." Nevertheless, an individualist ethics has an important underlying

presence throughout the book. Indeed, this book is a masterful combination of philosophical principles with empirical confirmation of those principles. The Objectivist ideal of a marriage of theory and practice is thus seamlessly presented. The arguments for the welfare state don't work because they contradict good ethical theory and have disastrous social consequences; such consequences are to be expected when we violate the norms of sound ethical theory.

Yet, we must wonder whether removing the welfare state, and thus establishing a political LOO entails a moral LOO. The welfare state could be taken to task for destroying community as much as for interfering with individual self-determination. In Kelley's framework, the welfare state seems dependent upon the idea that rights inhere in the collective rather than the individual. He speaks of the welfare state as requiring a conception that the collective somehow "owns" the individual (125). But while this has a certain rhetorical appeal to those already convinced of the individualist ethical framework (the moral LOO), it can only seem to others an exaggeration. Indeed it *is* an exaggeration, for by Kelley's own account (129), society cannot be a moral agent. Therefore, there can be no meaningful sense of societal ownership.

Moreover, it would seem to follow that if rights inhere only in the collective, we could not intelligibly speak of an individual rights defense of welfare. But Kelley will sometimes present brands of liberalism that do just that and will refer to rights-claims that some individuals place upon others for welfare assistance. Such views about rights may be mistaken—and I would be the first to support Kelley here—but it is one thing to view a position ("individuals have rights to welfare") as mistaken and another to view it as non-existent because it's really something else (i.e., not an individual rights position at all). Of course, it is true that whatever one *claims* for a theory, the theory may still boil down in the end to something else. But this does not seem to be the argument of the book; rather Kelley argues that defenses of welfare rights don't hold up under the scrutiny of an individual rights framework.

Kelley's own way of conceiving the problem, however, is to say that there are three main approaches to defending welfare rights: the

argument from economic freedom; the argument from benevolence; and the argument from community (64). Generally, Kelley proceeds on two separate levels simultaneously. For example, with respect to the first approach, there is the issue of whether economic "deprivations" give one a rights claim in justice. Answering this question seems to already presuppose a theoretical foundation for the individual rights position that is used to combat the welfare claim—namely it presupposes answers to questions about what constitutes virtue (justice) and it presupposes some theory about the nature of community. To some extent, these presuppositions are taken up by Kelley in the latter two approaches to justifying welfare.

These latter two approaches (benevolence and community), then, appear to be arguments about the basis for welfare rights themselves. Here, we seem to be at a foundational level with respect to rights. If these approaches are not kept distinct, the argument may sometimes look question begging: welfare rights are held suspect for not being in accord with an individualist framework, while the individualist framework is used to evaluate the truth of welfare rights.

This is not exactly apparent at first. In the argument from economic freedom, for example, Kelley claims that the notion of positive freedom—freedom to attain some economic level, advantage, good, or service—is indefensible. Consider this passage:

The concept [of positive freedom] runs up against two stubborn facts. The first is that we cannot meaningfully imagine being free from the constraints set by reality, including the fact that we need to produce in order to have any goods. The second is that when we cooperate with others in the course of making a living . . . the absence of a benefit is not the same as a positive harm. (74–75)

Implicit in this account is an image of a world where individuals, acting as separate producers of benefits and consequences, voluntarily come together to exchange value for value. However, while it is certainly undeniable that we cannot speak of being free from the constraints of reality in the abstract, the whole point of welfare is for

some who have done a better job of managing reality to help others who have bumped up against its constraints more severely. If production is claimed by some to be a matter of community, then we cannot combat that approach by showing how it runs contrary to the individualist picture or that it violates individual rights. Of course it does. It is supposed to be a system that removes some of the implications of an individualist approach to these matters.

Even by Kelley's own account, the individualist presuppositions are not so obvious. At one point, he tells us that the argument from community "is valid only if we regard economic wealth as an anonymous social product in which it is impossible to isolate individual contributions" (130). A few pages later, however, Kelley points out that "the society we inhabit today is . . . chiefly an association of strangers. . . . The products we buy are assembled from parts made all over the world, by people who do not speak the same languages, do not share the same customs, and have no inclination to sacrifice their interests for ours" (135). From this description, the production of economic wealth all sounds rather anonymous and one in which it is difficult or impossible to isolate individual contributions. Must we now describe economic life as a function of the "community"? We don't have much of the traditional sense of community if economic processes are a function of anonymous, disinterested, and often distant strangers. This is the basis for the left's critique of the market. But that the left views the market as lacking community does not necessarily mean that the market empirically conforms to an individualist conception of community either—whatever that might entail.

It is thus a little frustrating when precisely at these junctures, Kelley provides us with statistical pictures of how the system is failing, rather than a more philosophical analysis. While I am largely in agreement with Kelley's points of reference in this debate about welfare, I worry about the use of statistical snapshots; the left uses such techniques to document social problems and to conclude that such problems stem from individualist remnants within our culture!

The welfare debate seems to be reflective of much deeper intellectual and philosophical commitments; the book would probably

have had a good deal less value in contemporary debates if those depths had been explored. In this respect, *A Life of One's Own* succeeds as "intellectual ammunition," even if it falls short philosophically.

If we remove the work from the give and take of political debate, one of the deeper philosophical reflections that lies at least partially in the background is whether the individualist perspective that Kelley employs is even *necessary* to combat the arguments for welfare statism. Consider, for example, the chapter where Kelley examines the argument from benevolence. In this chapter, we are told at the beginning (94), that benevolence, compassion, and generosity are virtues; the claim is repeated at the end of the chapter (118) (though benevolence is not mentioned). There is little indication, though, as to why these would be virtues for Kelley, especially given his critical comments about altruism. Following Rand, Kelley wishes to distinguish these virtues from altruism, but even if he succeeds, it is still not clear why they are virtues for him given his individualistic framework. Most people, of course, would view any such distinction between these virtues and altruism as strained. Hence, in this context, philosophical analysis takes precedence over rhetorical and political effectiveness. Without such analysis, certain problems arise.

Rand claims that altruism is a doctrine that demands that each of us live for the sake of others. Given the close connection he presumes between politics and ethics, Kelley takes this to mean that we do not have the moral or the political right to live for ourselves. Without the moral right to live for ourselves, we have no right to keep the products of our actions. Altruism, thus, permits people to be coerced into living for others, because others have the right to our products. Even if we ignore the issue of whether Kelley operates with an appropriate definition of altruism, the real force of this argument depends less on the welfare state being altruistic than it does on its being coercive. Virtues, to be virtues, must be voluntarily exercised. But if we are coerced into them, then that coercing agent is necessarily anti-virtue. And while this seems right to me (and a reason why defenders of welfare are so eager to have these virtues reduced to the virtue of justice where "coercion" is appropriate), it is

an argument not the least bit dependent on a Randian conception of altruism or of individualism. Indeed, an argument against the compatibility of virtue and coercion is well within the ethical perspectives of thinkers like Hume and Smith, whom it would be quite misleading to label as "individualists," or as having very many significant connections with a Randian-type ethics.

Furthermore, while a number of non-Randian authors might very well accept Kelley's argument that coercing charity or entitling people to it undermines its virtuous character, they would be equally likely to think of benevolence, compassion, and generosity as virtues of community or, at least, virtues essentially directed toward others. They might be mistaken, but at least we know why these virtues are virtues in *their* ethical frameworks (because some virtues are oriented to the welfare of one's community, some to self).

And what if these other authors held that we *owed* it to our communities to develop such virtues. Would it follow that the virtues of benevolence, compassion, and generosity could then be coerced? Would they necessarily be altruists in Rand's sense of the term by speaking of such obligations? These questions speak to some very basic and interesting issues. They entail all the issues with which we began concerning what it means to live a LOO.

My own reading of Kelley is that he would have to answer "yes" to both questions, though I would answer "no." Even if my interpretation is incorrect here, what seems evident is that we do not need the individualist perspective to notice that welfare undermines the virtues of benevolence, compassion, and generosity.

The third and last argument for the welfare state that Kelley examines has similar characteristics to the others. He claims that welfare statists are communitarians who see "belonging" and "solidarity" as the central normative concepts, rather than individual rights. After correctly noting the communitarians' concern that the individualist approach tends to dissolve the social bonds that effectively make communities functional, Kelley concludes that communitarians must hold that "society *owns* a piece of the individual" (125). I assume that Kelley could not mean this as a logical inference, for the leap from premise to conclusion is simply too large.

Yet, if it is not logical, then the problem of defining away the alternative may be present. More importantly, there are plenty of conservatives who are no friends of the welfare state, but who would agree with communitarians that the effects of liberalism and individualism are worrisome. Alexis de Tocqueville made a similar point long ago and he didn't do so to forward the cause of welfare statism or the social ownership of individuals.

To carry the point one step further, some might claim that it is precisely individualism that created the pressure for the welfare state in the first place. Their argument might be that as individualism broke down traditional social connections, the intermediary institutions for charitable activities disappeared as well, leaving the alternative of either no help or the state.

Now I am not necessarily endorsing this alternative critique of individualism. My point is that there is a difference between showing why one's frame of reference precludes acceptance of a state welfare function and showing the grounds any rational person must accept in rejecting welfare. The latter is a good deal more difficult project than the former, yet it purports to be the project of this book. I would definitely recommend Kelley's book as a primer to the questions about welfare and for its various analyses. I do not mean to imply that the arguments of the book have little value, do not succeed, or are untrue. Rather, I believe that such a worthy book should motivate us to further and deeper reflection on what is increasingly complex as an intellectual issue, because it points to so many other fundamental questions. It should not be a book that lulls us into any complacency about the intellectual or practical death of the welfare state. That complacency too would be a failure to live a life of one's own.