

Books

**A Contest of Wills**

*Jonathan Jacobs*

*The Contested Legacy of Ayn Rand:  
Truth and Toleration in Objectivism*

Second Edition

David Kelley

Poughkeepsie, New York: The Objectivist Center,

New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2000

130 pp., index

*The Contested Legacy of Ayn Rand* seems to be a two-fold project. The author, David Kelley, is anxious to locate himself in a certain place in Ayn Rand studies and interpretation, and he is also anxious to make certain philosophical claims—assert them, defend them, and show how they owe a great deal to Rand. There is no reason why the attempts to carry out these two aims should conflict. However, the book does seem to oscillate back and forth between them—in some passages and sections carrying on a polemic with or about other Rand followers and interpreters; and in some passages and portions presenting philosophical claims and fragments of arguments, or rather, gestures in the direction of arguments. The overall result is what one might call ‘journalistic philosophy.’ There are ‘news’ reports from the ‘who-has-Rand-right’ front, and there are far-reaching philosophical claims, which are, apparently, what the author takes to be what is most at stake. There is a good deal of heat in the quarrel the author is participating in as a Rand interpreter, but the larger discussion of ideas is more measured and less agitated. The latter claims and issues are interesting and important in their own right, and one is moved to wonder how the news reports are relevant

---

*The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 329–37.

to them. It seems, though, that they are relevant in the following ways:

(1) The author wants to make a case for certain fundamental intellectual virtues and certain fundamental philosophical theses;

(2) It is claimed that those virtues were exemplified by Ayn Rand, and that it is to her that we owe many of those theses;

(3) There are certain people who claim to be carrying on her work and guarding her legacy who have misrepresented both her virtues and those theses;

(4) It is crucial to get clear about this so that the true significance of Rand is not misunderstood. This is why there is constant traffic between the polemical and the more broadly philosophical issues.

One of Kelley's main claims is that Objectivism is an "open system" and that it is susceptible of further elaboration and revision. Indeed, toleration [acknowledgment of "the virtue of rationality in others" (63)] is a crucial virtue, and Kelley argues that many who claim to be orthodox Objectivists have succumbed to "tribalism," with a hardened "Us against Them" mentality and an unhealthy dependence upon the group, for identity (86). In particular, Leonard Peikoff and Peter Schwartz come in for criticism, mainly on account of ossifying Objectivism into a dogma, and for claiming that any who diverge from their understanding of it are betraying Objectivism and Rand. (I should note that I am neither a partisan nor a participant in the debate about Rand's work or legacy.) Apparently, Peikoff and Schwartz are *especially* hostile to Objectivists who are willing to enter debate and dialogue with libertarians; and the issue of what is the proper stance toward libertarianism is what motivates much of the book.

According to the author, Schwartz insists that libertarianism is a type of subjectivist nihilism, lacking a philosophical basis that could make it congenial to Objectivists. I will leave it to readers who know the work of Peikoff and Schwartz, and also the works of libertarian thinkers, to judge whether their critique has any merit. I am not myself familiar with the disagreements among Objectivists, and the dispute about whether Objectivists can speak to libertarians without risk of betraying their principles or forfeiting their integrity, sounds

a bit like a noisy domestic disturbance that is not particularly instructive to overhear. It would seem that the key issue that is relevant to whether one should enter into debate with others is not so much a matter of what their principles are, but whether they exhibit (intellectual and practical) virtue in endorsing, defending, and enacting them. If there is supposed to be an *a priori* reason why Objectivists should not engage in debate with libertarians, it is a strangely esoteric *a priorism*. On the basis of Kelley's account, the reasons Peikoff and Schwartz have for anathematizing libertarians seem to be premised on a mischaracterization of libertarianism.

Kelley describes the position of Peikoff and Schwartz as centrally involving the claim that libertarianism does not take philosophy and philosophical reasons seriously—that the libertarian belief in liberty is philosophically unanchored. This would, I think, come as a considerable surprise to libertarians. (It would come as a quite *genuine* surprise—not as a penetrating insight that they would want to deflect because it captures and expresses the philosophically hollow core of libertarianism that libertarians have been anxious to disguise—or, something like that.) Even in those formulations of libertarianism in which the belief in liberty is foundational, it is not an unphilosophical view. Foundational justifications may be ultimate and underived, but they *are* justifications. Indeed, it is often a basic feature of foundationalism (whether epistemological, moral, or otherwise) that there are beliefs or principles that are reasonable, even when one need not be reasoned into them. That is, foundational claims are rational bases for other claims, and while not themselves inferred, they are not blind, arbitrary, or consistent with just any other belief. In any event, the case for libertarianism need not be foundational. What is crucial to it is the way in which certain kinds of claims of liberty and the rights of individuals figure in it, and figure with respect to questions of political legitimacy and the power of government.

It is puzzling to ascribe nihilism to libertarians, especially subjectivist nihilism, given that libertarians tend to assign objective, fundamental value to liberty, and can coherently assign objective value to the goods that can be secured by the exercise of liberty. They may be very accommodating with regard to how liberty is

exercised and the values people may permissibly seek to enact, but that is hardly a basis to regard libertarianism as either subjectivist or nihilistic, no less *both*. There may be 'vulgar' libertarians who are indulgent in the use of the idiom of 'rights,' and who do not give sustained thought to the principled basis of libertarianism, but there are vulgar versions of any philosophical position. There is nothing in libertarianism as such or in the libertarian tradition that marks it as philosophically shallow, opportunistic, or deceptive. The features of libertarianism attributed to it by the author's opponents do not (as far as I can tell) seem actually to be features of it, or at least the articulations of it that should seriously exercise anyone.

In the Preface to the second edition of *Contested Legacy* (a first edition appeared in 1990), the author states that "openness to debate within the [Objectivist] movement" and "more tolerance toward those outside" are "two sides of the same commitment to reason, objectivity, and respect for the independence of others as individuals" (11). Much of the book is an elaboration of this theme; sometimes a bit defensively, sometimes critical of others, sometimes articulating a conception of Objectivism without polemical entanglement. I will focus on the latter for most of the remainder of this review.

In expounding Objectivism, the author says that "Life, of course, is the fundamental value," and productive work is "the creation of value" (83). In addition, "certain kinds of actions" are virtues, because they are required if we value life (83). Reason is a "volitional faculty" (82). Also, "Objectivism has a highly distinctive view about what it means to think conceptually, to think in principles—a view that avoids the classic defects of rationalism on the one hand and empiricism on the other" (82). Conceptual thought is "conscious, volitional, and self-directed" (51).

There is a good deal of Aristotelian resonance in much of this, but the author does not attempt to explicate the (apparent) Aristotelianism or endorse it, except in the very broadest of terms. It might have been helpful to do so, as a strategy of placing the discussion in a larger and more accessible philosophical context. For example, on page 75, the author says that Rand's concept of objectivity

eliminates the breach between appearance and reality: the object of knowledge is the world itself as it appears to a knower with our faculties. Her theory of rational egoism eliminates the breach between interest and idealism: our happiness is to be achieved by fidelity to moral absolutes that are grounded in man's nature as a living being.

It would be enormously helpful to have a more patient and rigorous explication and defense of these claims than is supplied by the book.

In fairness to the author, he does insist that Rand's 'system' is not fully elaborated and he says, "I am speaking of a potential that has not yet been realized" (76). Still, crucial matters, such as the way in which "conceptual integration" is volitional, the way in which concepts are formed, and the way in which values are "a species of fact" (19) but are created by human beings (30), cry out for much fuller development than the highly programmatic formulation they are given. The view being advocated seems to be both metaphysically and epistemologically realist, but there is virtually no attempt to enter the realist/antirealist dialectic through which the view could be articulated and defended.

The author says that Rand's theory of measurement-omission "explains, for the first time in the history of philosophy, exactly how and why human concepts are objective" (121). What *is* that explanation? (Not, "what is the general characterization of the notion that concepts are objective?" but, "*what is the explanation?*")

Similarly, when the author says that Rand has formulated the view of reality as objective and facts as absolutes "with unprecedented depth and clarity" (81), it would be a huge help to the reader to be given at least a glimpse of the argumentative and analytical substance and form of the account. Perhaps those are already altogether familiar to Objectivists. Still, for the merits of Objectivism to be recognizable, they need to be exhibited by how they fare in the persistent and central problems of philosophy. We have in this book some bookkeeping (with assets showing up on the Objectivist side of the ledger) but we do not find the business being conducted in a competitive environment of ideas and arguments actually at work.

There is an immensely rich and complex ongoing debate about the nature of concepts and what it is to possess a concept, but while this book makes admiring gestures in the direction of a certain view of these matters, there is no attempt to make the case for that view—except to repeat that it is the best view. There is (just to point to one other example) an immensely rich and complex ongoing debate about the nature of moral value, its relation to natural facts and properties, and whether conative stances and affect are essential to value, or whether value should be interpreted more fully cognitively and realistically. Again, there is acclaim for Rand's view—but it remains a bit too much at the level of 'scorekeeping,' without doing the work of actually making the case. Surely additional light could be shed in order to explain how values are created and are a species of fact.

There are heroes and villains (Kant, in particular, is a, or *the* villain) but there is little telling of the philosophical story of why—or why the interpretations of the heroes and villains are correct or plausible interpretations. For example, Kelley says that he finds "Kant's epistemology a self-contradictory system that subverts reason at its base" (69), but we are left to infer just what leads him to that conclusion—and the assertion that a view is *self-contradictory* is indeed a strong and very specific claim. Not all contradictions are obvious, and the one of which Kant is allegedly guilty is not.

In this book, there are epistemological claims, ethical claims, metaphysical claims, metaethical claims, and claims in the philosophy of mind. It is clear that they are intended to cohere and to be supportable by various detailed considerations and arguments—but those considerations and arguments are presented in (at best) highly compressed and summary form. We know what Kelley wants the reader to accept, but there are scant dialectical resources with which to bring the reader around to that view. To revert to the brief discussion of the nature of concepts, according to Rand—and in particular, how her view is superior to the Kantian account—little more is said than that a concept "is an abstraction" (82), which is an integration of things "into a new mental unit that expands the range of our knowledge" (82). "An abstraction, however, does not exist as

such, over and above the concretes it integrates; it is the rule by which they are integrated" (82). (There is a particularly jejune treatment of concepts on pp. 66–67.) Before we can assess whether this is true, or the best explication of the nature of concepts, we need to be told a great deal more of what it *means*. What is an abstraction? In what sense is it a rule—what is its relation to the language used to express it? And so forth. Do concepts refer to properties, and are they to be interpreted realistically—and if so, in what way?

There is also the repeated claim that reason is a volitional faculty, and that Rand's views enable us to overcome the "notorious is-ought problem in philosophy" (82; see also 20). We are *told* this, but it is not explained. These are all significant, substantive philosophical claims. While many claims of Objectivism's merits are made, the claims that are needed to *underwrite* them are not present. The search for philosophical argument will be frustrated if one looks in this book.

Perhaps this reader was looking for things the author did not intend to present in the book. It may be that the polemical case against others who identify themselves as Objectivists is the focal concern of the author. Or perhaps the focal concern is to report that Objectivism has been misconstrued and misrepresented by those the author criticizes, and so, it is important to the author to characterize Objectivism as part of showing this. In that respect, perhaps it is asking for the wrong thing to ask for the supporting arguments. Still, the scale and number of the claims invites an interest in the arguments and a need for them. The book that supplied them would not be a book about the contested legacy of Ayn Rand; it would be more purely a philosophy book, and it may be that it was not the author's intention to write that kind of book.

It should be said that the book is written with fluency and it is not particularly jargon-riddled; though there are some usages of terms such as "evasion," "volitional," and even "happiness" and "virtue" that could be helpfully explicated. It is unclear whether a virtue is a state of character, or a more generic excellence that might be a cognitive state as well as a state of character. Also, the author unhelpfully says in one place "our nature requires certain kinds of

actions, [emphasis added] which we identify as virtues" (83). (There are virtuous acts and activities, but are actions virtues?) It is plain that "virtue" is honorific; but what is the account of virtue? One does not struggle to understand the author, except in the regard that a vast amount is left unsaid, and it is a vast amount that *needs* to be said if the author wants to draw people into the study of Objectivism, or to change the circumstance that "Objectivism lies so far" outside the mainstream of academic thought" (85). For that change to be brought about, Objectivist claims need to be articulated and defended with the sort of sustained and rigorous intellectual responsibility which, according to this book, Objectivism demands.

That actually points to what is perhaps the main strength of the book. It is, to a large extent, a plea for a combination of responsibility and tolerance, and it is the presentation of a case for the two being mutually reinforcing. The author says that "An Objectivist thinker must be a thinker first, an Objectivist second. He must regard Ayn Rand as he regards any great mind from whom he has learned: he gives her credit for her discoveries, and admires her accordingly, but admits no obligation to accept her as an authority" (77). "Objectivism is a philosophy of benevolence. It sees the world as an open sunlit field, where success is the norm, where we can approach others with the expectation that they will be rational" (87). One gets the impression that Kelley sees his dispute with certain other Objectivists as emblematic of the much larger issue, which is the conflict between the human capacity for reason, responsibility, and rational self-mastery on the one hand, and the human susceptibility to error, consoling illusion, misrepresentation, and resentful alienation from others, on the other hand.

We are (I gather from this book) to be egoists in a way that is not vulgarly self-aggrandizing. Still, for the view to engage those in philosophy who are not already personally committed to Objectivism, a much more thorough, patient, and detailed case for it must be made. It must be one which goes well beyond reporting that Objectivism may well prove "to be of historic importance" (75). The author does not intend that Objectivism should become a narrowly academic philosophy, and he notes that "[a]s Objectivism gains

visibility, for example, we can expect that some people will embrace it primarily as a political cause" (99), while others will be attracted to it for other reasons. He also notes that it is important to "communicate the ideas at many different levels and in different words, rather than simply repeating the canonical formulations" (100). His aspiration seems to be that Objectivism should be rigorous, definite, and certain of its core convictions and claims, but also tolerant, susceptible to development, and engaged with critics.

Objectivism can be firm without being hardened into dogma, and it can be articulated and show its appeal in textured ways without losing its integrity. If it is to appeal to people with a concern for principle and a need to have reasoned and rationally defensible commitments, it must make its appeal through demonstration of its virtues rather than insistence that it uniquely possesses them. Certainly if it is to fulfill that aspiration, making the distinctive philosophical claims it makes, much remains to be done to show that it is a serious and plausible philosophical contender in respect to the issues on which it takes positions.