

Economics

Discussion

Reply to Juliusz Jablecki, “Defending Advertising” (Spring 2008)

The Connection between Advertising and Objectivist Epistemology

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Juliusz Jablecki’s (2008) review of my book *In Defense of Advertising* (2007) suggests that the work has “a few minor shortcomings.” I would like to address those complaints in this reply.

My first comment concerns something not referred to by Jablecki as a shortcoming and he may not have intended it as one, but I find the impression left by the first two paragraphs misleading. Jablecki favorably compares my description of the function of advertising as salesmanship with a line from the movie *Thank You for Smoking*, which I have not seen but assume was funny. However, the juxtaposition of the movie with my book evokes the cynical amorality for which Hollywood is well known. Neither I nor present-day advertising executives share this amorality. Ad agencies routinely resign accounts and refuse to promote products they do not approve of.

The issue here is the moralization of concrete behaviors, recently discussed at length, albeit from the perspective of a psychologist, in the *New York Times Magazine* (Pinker 2008). It is the notion that concrete objects and behaviors—e.g., cigarettes, alcohol, and cheeseburgers and the smoking of cigarettes, the drinking of alcohol, and the eating of cheeseburgers—have in recent times been declared immoral or evil, instead of just impractical, whereas the traditional approach to ethics has viewed moral values and principles as abstract and universal. As I argue in my book, the advertising of such products is not immoral because neither the products themselves nor the behaviors per se are immoral. If someone wants to smoke cigarettes

and perhaps reduce the length of his life, that is his business. The same applies to the person who gobbles up cheeseburgers on a daily basis. These products and behaviors are what I refer to as optional values. Universal moral values are not optional.¹ The tendency to moralize concrete objects and behaviors has always been present to some extent, but the recent trend probably derives from the “nasty political correctness” of postmodernism (Hicks 2004, 82).

Jablecki’s main complaint quotes a previous reviewer who questions how much of Ayn Rand’s philosophy is needed to defend advertising and Jablecki himself raises other questions that he speculates “a well-versed Randian” would readily answer without the need of my book. Quite the contrary, it was comments of “well-versed Randians,” not to mention those of business and marketing professors, all of whom recited unquestioningly the litany of criticisms of advertising, that convinced me to write the book.

A defense of advertising begins on the surface by demonstrating that advertising is a product of capitalism, but it must then go beneath the surface to an ethics of egoism to demonstrate the morality of advertising. The advertising process is moral precisely because blatantly self-interested advertisers make blatantly self-interested appeals to consumers who then buy products to meet their blatantly self-interested needs and wants. Without egoism, advertising is a sin, the serpent in the Garden of Eden, or a symbol of exploitation. Finally, the defense must go to its roots in epistemology to answer the proponents of the Garden of Eden and exploitation, specifically the doctrine of pure and perfect competition, as well as the moralization of concrete objects and behaviors.

Advertising and marketing are applied sciences—“concepts of method,” to use Rand’s phrase (Rand 1990, 35–36, 305–6)—that rest on the more fundamental fields of psychology and economics, which in turn rest on philosophy. The nature and validity of scientific principles and the nature and role of statistics in economics and marketing require a sound epistemology. This is why Ludwig von Mises went to great lengths to provide economics with an epistemological foundation, and I have learned much from Mises and used many of his findings. However, Rand’s theory of concepts goes further by solving the so-called problem of universals, an issue that has been shunted to the sidelines for two hundred years by philoso-

phers wrangling over Kant's noumenal and phenomenal worlds, resulting in the triumph of nominalism and conceptual relativism (Hicks 2004, 76). Without an understanding of how concepts are formed, and tied to reality, our entire edifice of knowledge stands without support and is at risk of being toppled by any strong, unopposed force that comes along. In Mises' time, that force was historicism in Europe and logical positivism in the United States. Today that force is postmodernism. The bottom line for a defense of advertising and salesmanship is the question: Are they *by definition* sleazy, as the critics seem to think, or do they have a rational basis in reality? Their definitions depend on a theory of concepts.

Such fantasyland notions as the doctrine of pure and perfect competition, to further elaborate the need of epistemology, cannot be answered by reference to its unreality or impracticality. When *reductio ad absurdum* arguments are proposed to refute it, economist Milton Friedman (1953), good Platonist that he was, simply responds, in effect, with a "so what?", arguing that "such criticism is largely irrelevant," because empirical prediction, for him, is the payoff of any theory (41). The moralization of concrete objects and behaviors cannot be answered without discussing the doctrine of intrinsic value, which in turn cannot be answered without refuting the doctrine of intrinsic essences. Sound epistemology, fixed firmly in reality, is required to demonstrate valid theory, and that requires a solution to the problem of universals, which is what the Objectivist theory of concepts provides. The interconnectedness of knowledge, as Rand emphasized—from the most concrete to the most abstract, and vice versa—requires cognizance of those connections and vigilance in their formation and use.

In addition to this main complaint, Jablecki misconstrues Rand's view of self-sacrifice when he assumes that it is immoral to die for one's own children. Rand defines sacrifice as giving up a higher value for the sake of a lower- or non-value. She herself said that she would take a bullet for her husband, because, she said, life would not be worth living without him. I would do the same for my daughter or wife. There is no sacrifice here. My daughter and wife are not lower- or non-values to me.

Another complaint is that I label religious conservatives "propagandists" and quote Mises who is highly critical of Christianity in his

early work *Socialism* (Mises [1936] 1981, 378–87). Jablecki is correct that this issue does need more elaboration, perhaps in another context, but I was referring to the “religious conservatives” of the last half century who claim to be advocates of capitalism, but in fact are not (Rothbard 2007). I also fail to see a contradiction between Mises’ comments on religion and Christianity in his later works, summarized in Hülsmann (2007, 982–86), and those of *Socialism*. Mises’ later comments are more refined and may indicate a fuller understanding of the history of Christianity, but they do not deny Jesus’ resentment of the rich nor do they propose that Christianity is a “defense against doctrines inimical to property” (Mises 1981, 379).

Two final shortcomings refer to my treatment of Kant in relation to Mises and my discussion of monopoly. I do discuss Mises’ Kantianism (Kirkpatrick 2007, 137–38 n. 47). I suggest that Mises is in fact more Aristotelian than he is Kantian and argue that the further writers are from philosophy, that is, the more applied their disciplines, the more likely they are to misinterpret a philosopher’s ideas. My discussion of monopoly is based on Reisman (1996, chapter 10), who shares much in common with Rothbard on the topic.

While, no doubt, more could be said about each of these issues, on both sides of the questions, I do want to thank Jablecki for the time and effort he put into his mostly positive review of my book.

Notes

1. Pornographic literature is a more complex issue, because books, magazines, and movies contain intellectual content, which in the case of pornography involves the denigration of sex and, sometimes, the abuse of children. I am not so cavalier in my attitude toward the advertising of pornographic literature as Jablecki seems to imply (Kirkpatrick 2007, 99–101).

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