

A Life of One's Own

Individual Rights and the Welfare State By David Kelley

Reviewed by Henry C. Scuoteguazza

The welfare state is a major part of our culture and plays a central part in our ongoing political debate. While liberals look for ways to expand the scope of the welfare state and conservatives strive to stymie this growth, neither side challenges the right for people to receive welfare. David Kelley, executive director of the Institute for Objectivist Studies, on the other hand, does question whether people have the right to be taken care of in his book, *A Life of One's Own*.

Before answering this question, Kelley explains how the welfare state was born and grew into the present day sacred cow. The welfare state and the concept of rights that support it are fairly new inventions. The first notion of welfare rights arose during the 1880's in the Otto von Bismarck regime of Germany who initiated the idea of "social insurance." Oddly enough, Bismarck created this idea as an attempt to out maneuver socialist reformers. Once the idea sprouted, it established roots and grew with the backing of anti-Enlightenment forces which fought the individualism spawned by the Enlightenment.

Kelley uncovers a cluster of ideas that played a role in this development. Among the factors are the belief in economic determinism and the appropriateness of coercion backed by the moral impetus of altruism, the belief that we have no right to exist for our own sake. Kelley points out how the personal terms "the poor" and "the unemployed" eventually changed to the impersonal terms of "poverty" and "unemployment." Citing Gertrude Himmelfarb, "The emphasis thus shifted from the personal characteristics of the poor to the impersonal causes of poverty." As Kelley states: "The link between determinism and the expanded concept of coercion is thus clear. If human beings lack the inner resources to form their own values and convictions, if they are vulnerable to all the social influences acting upon them, then every such influence is in effect a compulsion, and there is no difference in kind between the literal use of force and the 'forces' that were said to keep people from acting responsibly."

The core rationale for welfare rights is the belief that "without the enjoyment of certain goods, it is argued, individuals cannot achieve the ends that freedom is for." Kelley bases his counter-argument on our right to life. Living requires our ability to act which in turn depends on our freedom to choose. "Freedom is the condition in which we can act independently, and the essence of independence is the power to act on the basis of our own deliberate judgment." Welfare rights contradict our right to life because it

prevents us from fully choosing how to enjoy the fruits of our labor.

In addition to the moral questions, Kelley also addresses the practical implications of welfare policy and shows how it often leads to unintended consequences. For instance, offering aid to mothers with dependent children has attracted a cadre of women who purposely get pregnant in order to increase their relief check. Medicare and Medicaid were formed to help the elderly afford health care but the government-imposed price controls shifted the costs to other patients.

Kelley presents the various collectivist arguments in favor of welfare rights fairly and with a minimum of polemics. Kelley's writing displays his normal lucid style, although his civility towards his opponents and lack of polemics leads to a rather dispassionate tone (perhaps intentionally). Kelley, as usual, makes a number of nice distinctions yet falls prey to several false alternatives that, in the long run, hurt his case.

According to Kelley, the case for welfare rights fails because there is "no universal and nonarbitrary standard for distinguishing need from luxury." He also asks, "where do the weak get the right to be carried by the strong?" Thus, when welfare advocates cry that government support is not enough, Kelley points out that "enough" is a normative term which implies a standard, a standard he believes does not exist.

The alternatives Kelley offers is need versus luxury and the weak pitted against the strong. In other words, he accepts the key choices prevalent in the current welfare debate. He loses an opportunity to redefine the basic argument over welfare rights. His denial of a universal standard by which to judge such issues is odd given Kelley's adherence to a key premise of the Objectivist ethics: Man's life as the standard of value which in turn rests on the fundamental choice we all face, existence or non-existence.

Instead of choosing between need and luxury, we ultimately confront the choice of survival or death. Instead of the weak living off the strong, we can use a different concept - metaphysical independence. Normal adults are born with the minimum necessary equipment needed to survive on their own. We eat for ourselves, breathe for ourselves and (hopefully) think for ourselves. We therefore have the ability to create the values we need to live. Unfortunately some people have such severe limitations that they cannot support themselves. This includes mental retardation, physical handicaps, and incapacitating injury. Implicit in Kelley's argument is the conclusion that people will die if they do not receive voluntary aid. Yet these people had no responsibility for their fate, just as we had nothing to do with being born normal.

The concept of metaphysical independence can lead to a different conclusion. Rights protect those who are born with metaphysical independence to choose and act in their quest to live. For those who absolutely cannot survive on their own, rights strive to ensure they have the bare minimum to live. One could argue that supporting those few people who do not have metaphysical independence does not threaten those who do have it. At the very least, one could argue for government policing the treatment of these people by their voluntary supporters. Metaphysical independence can provide a nonarbitrary and universal standard for limited welfare rights: does the person possess the ability to live on their own and, if not, are they responsible for not having this ability.

Thus, because Kelley accepts the false alternatives discussed above, he does not address head-on those who are truly unable to support themselves. Instead Kelley shifts to the easy to dismiss cases such as the welfare queens who demand help yet have the ability to support themselves.

Despite these concerns, *A Life of One's Own* deserves to be read widely. It represents the Objectivist/libertarian case in a reasonable manner and in a style accessible to everyone.