

## Unrugged Individualism by David Kelley

Reviewed by Henry C. Scuoteguazza

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I remember attending a Leonard Peikoff speech at Ford Hall Forum some years ago and I overheard one person saying to the other: "Isn't this hall filled with benevolence?" I was dumbfounded by that statement, especially since it came from someone who vehemently condemned anyone who read the then just published The Passion of Ayn Rand by Barbara Branden. If I were asked to search for a word to describe the prevalent atmosphere in the hall benevolent would certainly not have been one of my choices. It is unfortunate that many of the advocates of Objectivism -- a philosophy whose founder described as life affirming and who proclaimed the importance of seeking values -- have not exhibited much benevolence towards the "outside" world nor, sadly, even to each other. In fact over the years I have seen friendships severed with breathtaking swiftness over disagreements that would not have ended "normal" friendships. One would think if there was any benevolence in Objectivism it would be exhibited at least amongst its advocates.

I believe a constellation of factors come into play here: moral perfectionism (as it is defined), cultural pessimism and the tendency to seek the one and only right approach to life. But, even if these factors were eliminated one issue would still bedevil us. The benevolence Rand depicted in her novels appears primarily between her heroes and heroines who occupy in Atlas Shrugged and The Fountainhead a world purposely designed to show the extremes of individualism and collectivism, of egoism and altruism worked out in conflict. The issue of benevolence as it applies to our day-to-day dealings with people receives little attention in the Objectivist corpus.

The real world, however, is a bit more complicated. Many people espouse ideas contrary to Objectivism. If we take them at face value we have cause to be both hostile to people and cynical about the future. However, if you look at how people actually live the picture is less stark and less bleak (although still challenging). Many people strive to live what they think is a good life, a life consisting of a rewarding and interesting job, a caring and supportive home life and stimulating recreation and social life. It would seem appropriate then that a reasonable and benevolent approach to dealing with these people and to promulgating our philosophy is to support these life

supporting and enhancing activities while using the appropriate opportunities to show where their conscious convictions contradict their commitments.

Unfortunately, benevolence of this sort has not received much attention among Objectivists, until recently. David Kelley has shot the opening volley in his much anticipated monograph Unrugged Individualism. It seems that this book has struck a nerve considering how much pre-publication attention it received, and deservedly so. Kelley makes the first concerted effort to show how benevolence can be grounded in an ethics of self-interest. Kelley has said the first word but not the last. For the handful of you who might not have read Kelley's book yet, I'll summarize it here. For those of you who have read the book, I offer some additional thoughts.

Kelley starts by challenging the long-standing connection between benevolence and altruism. Contemporary moral philosophy upholds the virtue of benevolence as altruistic because it typifies "other-regarding" virtue. That is, we show our regard for others by being benevolent, by putting their interests ahead of ours. Therefore, if altruism is true, then benevolence is a major virtue. Kelley counters with: "Insofar as benevolence means commitment to behaving peacefully toward others, respecting their rights and giving them what is due, it is an issue of justice, which is a selfish virtue, not an act of altruism."

This depiction of benevolence is not Kelley's full rendition, as we'll see. He goes on to expand his concept. To establish whether or not benevolence is a major or minor virtue, Kelley moves on to discuss how to analyze virtues.

As we all know, Rand defined value as that which we act to gain and/or keep; virtues are the acts by which we gain and/or keep values. Kelley suggests we should look to what values a virtue aims to tell us if it is a legitimate virtue and, secondly, whether it is a major or minor virtue.

The values at which benevolence aims are visibility, communication and economic exchange. By visibility Kelley refers to two forms: sharing a value that is part of my identity such as an interest in music with another person and affirming my identity by interacting with another person. Visibility lets us see a part of ourselves realized in the world. (By the way, I would add under economic exchange the benefit of synergy from working in teams. Much of modern business involves

working in and through teams.) Underlying these values are the values of wealth, knowledge and self-affirmation, which in turn point to the cardinal values of productive purpose, reason and self-esteem. While working benevolently with others does not substitute for these cardinal values, the nature of living successfully in a modern civilization means we have to work with others in varying degrees. For this reason, Kelley ranks benevolence as next to the most important virtues of productivity, rationality and pride. "Values derivable from others ... are at the penultimate level. They are next to cardinal in importance." (This is a position similar to the one I took in my article, "Noninstrumental Virtues.") Kelley makes a key point here, one worth highlighting. "In order to obtain the benefits of living with others in society, we cannot function solely as judges, we must also function as entrepreneurs." Benevolence then inclines us to explore relationships which could flourish into profitable ones. This approach also suggests we should act and not just sit passively around judging others.

Kelley then considers the facts upon which benevolence is based. These are fundamental facts we need to recognize as a part of being objective. We need to recognize people's humanity, which includes observing or celebrating certain universal events which point to universal values: marriage, death, birth, etc. We also respect the independence of others, and their right to live as an end in themselves, just as we claim the right for ourselves. We also recognize each person's individuality, the discovery of which requires us to be sensitive. And finally, we need to recognize the harmony of interests. "When I treat others benevolently, I convey to them that I do not see them as threats or as prey."

Thus, integrating all of the above, Kelley arrives at the following definition: "Benevolence is a commitment to achieving the values derivable from life with other people in society, by treating them as potential trading partners, recognizing their humanity, independence, and individuality, and the harmony between their interests and ours."

Kelley argues that benevolence is inextricably tied to productiveness, in which we ask ourselves "What if?" versus the "It is" statement of rationality. Benevolence inclines us to look for opportunities to trade with others. Kelley also touches on civility, sensitivity and generosity, specific expressions of benevolence. He claims giving aid in an emergency, for instance, is self-interested "because of the value to ourselves of a society in which such aid is available when we need it for ourselves and those we care for." In fact, Kelley goes so far to say such assistance, while not being something a person in need can

demand as a right, is something we are obliged to offer (non-sacrificially, of course). He uses the (in)famous case of Kitty Genovese in which the people who could have helped her simply by calling the police (anonymously) but instead did nothing. These people did something wrong according to Kelly (I agree). Of course we can get into stickier cases where someone might expose themselves to significant risk to save another person's life such as diving into a river to save someone from drowning or hurling themselves at a person standing in the path of an oncoming truck. In those cases too, the rescuer estimates they have a reasonable chance of succeeding. You don't hear such rescuers on the 11:00 news saying "Yeah, I saved his life and I'm surprised I didn't end up as road kill."

Kelley's point is important: such assistance, whether it is an emergency or just more normal acts of generosity, means "one's life is improved in a world with better, happier, more fully realized people in it." Creating values motivates us.

Objectivism's value focus makes it a unique philosophy, not just in emphasizing obtaining and consuming values but in creating them. This is an aspect that even Objectivists tend to forget. The tendency is towards consuming values versus creating them. But I would add at least two other actions we can take towards values which can affect how we look at benevolence. Before exploring these and other issues, let me say we should be thankful to David Kelley for his invaluable contribution. His book should be required reading for all those interested in expanding Objectivism. It could be the equivalent of the shot heard around the Objectivist world. Unrugged Individualism isn't the last word that should be said on the subject but it is an invaluable first word. If the message sticks perhaps it'll help us more effectively show others the benefits of Objectivism. We need to show Objectivism as a key to consistent happiness.

I'd like to take this opportunity to offer a few additional thoughts of my own. As I mentioned above, we can act in at least two other ways regarding values: honoring and expressing them. We honor values by acting true to them, as examples of a vision of how we think humans should live and should live together. By honoring our values and principles, such as objectivity, living rationally, living sociably, etc., we commemorate their importance, we put our values where our mouth is. It is awfully easy to espouse how much we value the world, reason, and our life but these are just empty words unless we act on these values.

In so doing, we also express the importance of these values. Like a lighthouse which casts its light into the darkness as a beacon, our actions can speak louder than words. This is true especially in dealing with people who can't return the favor and could never be potential trading partners. Examples would be people with severe handicaps (who might even be a family member). I'm also referring to people with whom we have only a passing encounter. For instance, when I travel for business in the U.S. or internationally, I deal with numerous people from cab drivers to people on the street. I treat all of them the same, as casual acquaintances. In being civil, considerate, even friendly we implicitly recognize and express the equivalent of this thought: "Isn't it great to be alive? Isn't life great when we treat each other as ends? Is this the way life should be?"

As I said before, many if not most of the people I encounter implicitly (or explicitly) strive to create and enjoy values, despite whatever their espoused moral beliefs. Hell, even priests golf!

Let me close with a list of brief additional points.

1. Benevolence as selected by human evolution. Although we don't hear too much about evolution in Objectivist thought it is a fact we are the product of thousands if not millions of years of evolution. Darwin's work has been expanded recently with the focus on how our behavior has been shaped by our evolutionary heritage. (Two fascinating books on the subject are Robert Wright's The Moral Animal and Ellen Dissanake's Homo Aestheticus.)

As Wright says: "Friendship, affection, trust -- these are things that, long before people signed contracts, long before they wrote down laws, held human societies together. Even today, these forces are one reason human societies vastly surpass ant colonies in size and complexity even though the degree of kinship among cooperatively interacting people is usually near zero." Later, quoting an anthropologist: "an individual who maximizes his friendships and minimizes his antagonisms will have an evolutionary advantage, and selection should favor those characteristics that promote the optimization of personal relationships." And as Ellen Dissanake writes: "because humans are absolutely dependent on their long-term survival on living in a viable social group, we can speak of individual human behaviors that contribute to group cohesion and survival as being selectively beneficial to individuals."

In other words, we are metaphysically independent and we are socially interdependent. Among our basic needs as humans are autonomy and visibility, two potentially conflicting needs. The key then depends on looking at relationships not as "me versus you" but as "me and you". A civil, benevolent, considerate relationship works to our mutual benefit as well as helping to sustain the glue holding our civilization together.

2. Benevolence as well-wishing. From the above discussion I would then add a component to Kelley's definition: benevolence as well-wishing (which is the Latin meaning of the word) for the sake of the other person. The degree of well-wishing varies depending on how close we are to the other person. The degree of closeness will vary by the degree to which we share values. It is not altruistic to wish another person well, to take interest in them for their sake because they are important to us. Well-wishing is a no cost or low cost activity consisting of our psychic investment in another person. We are saying: "As one end-in-itself to another I hope you do well."

Well-wishing or benevolence consists in encouraging people we see struggling to get ahead because it's in their best interest. Whether or not their actions ever directly or indirectly benefit us we still honor the principle of rational self-interest and having a productive purpose in life as being life-supporting and civilizing principles.

For those with whom we have a close relationship, their ends will differ from ours. We wish them well for their own sake. This is not altruism. Unfortunately, regard for others is equated with altruism. Altruism dictates that we sacrifice our interests and values to others, that we have no right to live our lives as we want. Having and expressing regard for others means we can even do something for another person to help them with no expectation of payback. This appears to violate the Objectivist premise of all actions having to benefit us. Kelley modifies this somewhat by saying we should help 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." I hold that such assistance even to strangers, as long as it isn't self-sacrificial, can be justified if it involves honoring or expressing values that are important to us (such as contributing to make the world more like we think it should and can be). I keep returning to raising children as a prime example of a decision that has major, life-changing impact. Ultimately, raising children often requires putting the interests of the child ahead of ours. We do it because we they are important to us, not because we secretly hope our offspring will one day wipe the drool from our elderly faces and feed us when we can't. We do it (or should) because we are

have chosen to create another life and have accepted the responsibilities that go with it. Some of these responsibilities requires us to, say, defer vacations and other purchases in order to save for their college. In so doing we give our children a guiding hand until they can live on their own, just as we ran along side their bike with a steadying hand until they can balance the bike themselves.

3. Benevolence as an expression of optimism. Many objectivists talk about the benevolent universe premise (on which Kelley has some interesting comments) yet, culturally, they are profound pessimists primarily due to the prevalent belief that all people are scum and civilization is inexorably hurtling toward barbarism. Whether or not we accept the benevolent universe premise, we would could still choose to adopt a generally benevolent attitude. (Probably one of the most significant testaments to a hopeful future is the decision to have children.)

As I have said before, many of the people I deal with consciously or subconsciously live to enjoy values. They might adhere to ideas contrary to their day-to-day operating premises but they still live to find happiness. This alone should give us some cause for optimism and grounds for benevolence. Strategically, our ideas will find better acceptance if we approach people assuming they are interested in being happier and we work to influence their beliefs than if we bombard them with sarcasm and cynicism.

4. Benevolence as self-payment. The concept of acting so that we benefit creates the mistaken impression we need to see some payback whether it's in terms of tangible values, returned love, or undefined, unpredictable benefits in the future.

I hold that in self-realization, in obtaining, creating, expressing, and honoring values we don't always need to expect payment in kind from others. The satisfaction of these activities can be its own payment. Please note: I am not saying virtue is its own reward but the creation of values can be. The reward is the emotion of fulfillment which we experience when we exercise our vital powers along lines of excellence in a life affording them scope. Benevolence entails facing the world optimistically without expecting to be paid. Sometimes others pay us; sometimes we pay ourselves.

5. Benevolence as treating others as ends. It is an irony of life that you don't obtain happiness by pursuing it. You find happiness when you achieve values. Likewise, you don't necessarily get payment from

others if you face them with the thought of "I'll do this for you so that I get something in return." People tend to withdraw or become reserved, even in strictly business relationships, if they sense you look at them as a cash register to be opened by hitting the right buttons. I have seen this in action in business even though it is acknowledged the basis of business relationships is "I'll deal with you because you can give me what I want." Even in business much time and money is spent cultivating friendships, obviously in the interests of establishing a long-term financial relationship. But I believe this also reveals the basic human need to connect with others.

6. Benevolence as an expression of thankfulness. If you think about it, it's a miracle we're here and we have progressed so far from our humble beginnings. I'm referring to us being here as a human race, as individuals, and even to the creation of life itself. I'm not advocating divine creation of life nor for a malevolent universe which could wipe us out at any moment. But, looking at it from a broader perspective, it is utterly amazing to think of how a complex organism like us developed, the incredibly fortuitous combination of conditions that allowed the Earth to develop and support life, the complex, painstaking process of evolution and then our individual growth from a fertilized egg.

Much of the talk about life as the ultimate value and as the standard of value tends to be in abstract, dry terms. It is worth stopping to ponder exactly what that means. To do so is to respond with awe and wonder at the magnificence of life in general, humans as a species and us as individuals. Then add in the fruits of living in our civilization. It brings a new meaning to Rand's term "man worship."

What does this have to do with benevolence? The perspective I have just described engenders a sense of community with others and with other living things. It entails keeping this perspective in mind as thankfulness to be here and to share our lives with others. This can also translate into generosity, the desire to share or give values. I'm not advocating giving away value promiscuously but it means a lessened focus on quid pro quo.

It does not mean we should tolerate those with narrow vision, who are irrational or who treat others as mere objects. Justice dictates we give them their due and let them know their actions will have consequences. If what I have said is true, that many if not most people live to pursue values, then our standard operating attitude should be more positively than neutrally. It does mean however to



greet fellow humans -- until proven otherwise -- as potential friends or at least as fellow travelers in our journey into the future.

Allow me to offer a somewhat different description of benevolence which does not have the rigor of Kelley's and which does not necessarily contradict his. This description tries to capture the essence of my approach. Benevolence is well-wishing directed to other people viewed as ends, as an evolutionary outcome of social interactions and as an expression of thankfulness for being able to obtain, create, honor and express values we have and for just being alive.