

# APPENDIX A

## A Question of Sanction

An Open Letter, March, 1989

[This open letter was written in response to an article Peter Schwartz published in *The Intellectual Activist* in early 1989. I sent copies to about 30 people, including Schwartz himself and Leonard Peikoff, and authorized anyone to copy and distribute it further. Within a few weeks it had circulated widely in the Objectivist movement. Peikoff's "Fact and Value" was written in response to it.]

A number of people have asked me about "On Sanctioning the Sanctioners" (*The Intellectual Activist* 2/27/89), which was in part an attack on me for speaking to libertarian groups. In response, I want to set the record straight regarding my own actions, and to identify certain attitudes in the article that I think are incompatible with a philosophy of reason.

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In addition to my philosophical work over the last fifteen years, I have been a polemicist for freedom. In scores of articles and speeches, my goal has been to defend individual rights on an Objectivist foundation—as clearly and forcefully as I can to as wide an audience as possible. As a polemicist, my efforts are naturally directed at people who are not already Objectivists. To reach that audience I must speak to groups and write for publications that do not share my ideas. In using these channels of communication, I try to make sure that my association with them does not put me in the position of endorsing ideas I reject. That would defeat my purpose. But I cannot engage my opponents without conferring some benefit on them, in some indirect and attenuated fashion—buying their books, helping them retain their audience, or the like. If every such benefit is to be condemned as aiding the enemy, then one cannot participate in the marketplace of ideas. One can only preach to the converted—a sorry sort of ingrown activism.

In any given case, therefore, I weigh the costs of association against

the possible gains. Before I accept a writing or speaking engagement, I consider whether my sponsors are offering me access to an audience I could not otherwise have reached; or whether I would be helping them attract an audience *they* could not otherwise have earned. I consider whether my sponsors have a definite editorial policy or ideological commitment opposed to Objectivism, and, if so, whether they are willing to have me state my disagreement explicitly. I consider whether the format of my appearance would suggest that I endorse other speakers and their views. And I consider what I know of their moral and intellectual character. In weighing these and other matters, I am always looking for long-range strategic gain at minimal cost. That's how you fight a war of ideas.

In the case of libertarians, I have turned down many invitations because I felt the costs outweighed any likely gain. But the balance sometimes tips the other way. I recently spoke at the Laissez Faire Supper Club on the role of Objectivism in defending freedom—the incident to which Peter Schwartz refers in his articles. I have also accepted an invitation to speak on the ethical foundations of rights at the Cato Institute's Summer Seminar in July. Of the factors that affected these decisions, the following are the most important:

- Libertarianism is a broadly defined movement. The subjectivists represent one definite wing of the movement, and we cannot make common cause with them. But they are not the only or even the predominant wing. Many who describe themselves as libertarians recognize that rights must be grounded in a rational, secular, and individualist moral philosophy. I know and have worked with many such people, and I regard them as potential allies in the cause of liberty. I have generally found them open to Objectivist ideas, so long as one doesn't harangue them in a spirit of sectarian hostility. When I was invited to speak at the Cato seminar, for example, the organizers were enthusiastic about my proposal to explain why Ayn Rand's ethics is a better foundation for rights than any alternative.

- Laissez Faire Books is not a magazine with an editorial policy, or a party with a platform. It is a book service, selling works that take many different positions on philosophical issues. Unlike a general-purpose book store, it deals primarily with works that are relevant to a free market, but within that range the owners select books primarily on the basis of what will interest their customers. This includes virtually anything on Objectivism, pro or con. One can certainly quarrel with some of their selections, but one cannot accuse them of loading the dice against us. They are eager to sell Ayn Rand's own works, as well as the contributions her followers have made to the literature. I am delighted that they have brought our work to the attention of their customers, some of whom were

not previously familiar with Objectivism, and I have autographed copies of *The Evidence of the Senses* as a way to help sales. In doing so, I was not endorsing or supporting any work but my own. Nor do I “promote” the bookstore, as Schwartz claims, except in the sense of regarding it as a legitimate commercial enterprise.

- The same principle applies to the Supper Club they sponsor. In appearing there, I was not, as Schwartz says, an after-dinner speaker at a libertarian function. I *was* the function. The sole purpose of the occasion was to hear my explanation of why individual rights and capitalism cannot be established without reference to certain key principles of Objectivism: the absolutism of reason, the rejection of altruism, and the commitment to life in this world as a primary value. Since I explicitly criticized libertarian ideas that are incompatible with those principles, I was obviously not endorsing them.

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Such, in brief, is the reasoning that has governed my conduct as a public advocate of Objectivism. Peter Schwartz regards it as transparently wrong, beyond any possibility of honest disagreement. He asserts that libertarians are the moral “equivalent” of the Soviet regime, and I the equivalent of Armand Hammer. These are wild accusations, preposterous on their face. But they exhibit a kind of zealotry that has a wider significance than the fact that Second Renaissance doesn’t carry my works. I want to comment on three specific issues.

1) *A sense of proportion.* Even if we accepted the premise that libertarianism as such is a vice, there would be a vast difference of degree between libertarians and a regime that has the blood of millions on its hands. When we formulate moral principles, we may abstract from such differences of degree; we omit measurements, as Ayn Rand explained. But when we *apply* the principles in forming moral judgments about particulars, we must reintroduce the relevant measurements. Just as one diminishes the good by praising mediocrity, one trivializes evil by damning the venial. If libertarians are no better than Soviet dictators, then Soviet dictators are no worse than libertarians. Those who indulge in moral hysteria—condemning all moral error with the same fury, without regard to differences of degree—destroy their own credibility when it comes to the depths of evil: the Stalins, the Hitlers, the Ayatollah.

2) *Evil vs. error.* A cardinal principle of Objectivist ethics is that one should not give evil the moral sanction it needs to justify itself and disarm its victims. And a principle of responsible advocacy is that one should not endorse false ideas. These principles are related but they are not the same, because evil and error are not the same.

The concept of evil applies primarily to actions, and to the people who perform them. Schwartz asserts that we should not sanction the Soviets because they are “philosophical enemies.” This is a bizarre interpretation of their sins. Soviet tyrants are not evil because they believe in Marxian collectivism. They are evil because they have murdered millions of people and enslaved hundreds of millions more. An academic Marxist who subscribes to the same ideas as Lenin or Stalin does not have the same moral status. He is guilty of the same intellectual error, but not of their crimes (unless and to the extent that he actively supported them, as many did in the 1930s, although even here we must recognize a difference in degree of culpability).

Truth and falsity, not good or evil, are the primary evaluative concepts that apply to ideas as such. It is true that the horrors of this century were made possible by irrationalist and collectivist ideas. Bad ideas can be dangerous; that’s one reason we shouldn’t endorse them. But they are dangerous because *people* use them to perpetrate evil. We are not Hegelians: ideas per se are not agents in the world. Truth or falsity is the essential property of an idea; the good or ill it produces is derivative. It is also true that a given person may adopt false ideas through evasion, which is morally wrong. But another person might adopt the same idea through honest error. The assumption that libertarians as such are immoral is therefore an egregious insult. Some are honest and rational, some are not. The same is true for any other ideological group, including Objectivists. It is a gross *non-sequitur* to infer that because an idea is false, its adherents are evil for holding it.

The failure to draw these distinctions has a pernicious effect. If we approach ideas with the question: true or false?, we stand ready to combat bad ideas by the only means appropriate to intellectual issues: open, rational discussion and debate. But if we approach ideas with the question: good or evil?, we will avoid debate for fear of sanctioning evildoers. We will substitute condemnation for argument, and adopt a non-intellectual, intolerant attitude toward any disagreement with our views.

3) *Tolerance*. Tolerance is not a virtue where evil is concerned; evil flourishes by the tolerance of good people. But it *is* a virtue in the cognitive realm. It is appropriate not only among people who disagree about the application of principles they share, but also among people who disagree on the principles themselves. Tolerance is not a weak-kneed confession of uncertainty. It is a recognition that certainty is contextual. It is a recognition of the fact that knowledge is neither revealed nor invented, but acquired by an active process of integration; that any conclusion we reach is tied to reality by a long chain of reasoning, and presupposes an

enormous context; and that open discussion and debate are the proper means of intellectual exchange.

To have any hope of persuading others, we must take the trouble to understand their context; we must approach them on an equal footing, a mutual willingness to be persuaded by the facts; and we must grant them time to sort through the issues and make sure that any new conclusion is rooted in their own grasp of reality. If we find that the other person is not open to reason, we should abandon the effort. Tolerance does not require that we beat our heads against the wall, or put up with willful irrationality. But we should assume that people *are* rational until we have evidence to the contrary. In this respect, tolerance is the intellectual expression of benevolence.

Benevolence has another and to my mind more important benefit: the growth of our own knowledge. There is much we can learn from others if we are willing to listen. And even where they are wrong, we strengthen the foundations of our own beliefs—the accuracy and range of our observations, the validity of our concepts, the rigor of our arguments—by the effort to prove *why* they are wrong.

That's why every age of reason has welcomed diversity and debate. The great minds of the Enlightenment declared war on the entire apparatus of intolerance: the obsession with official or authorized doctrine, the concepts of heresy and blasphemy, the party lines and intellectual xenophobia, the militant hostility among rival sects, the constant schisms and breaks, the character assassination of those who fall from grace. These are the techniques of irrational philosophies, such as Christianity or Marxism, and may well have been vital to their success. But they have no place in a philosophy of reason.

Ayn Rand left us a magnificent system of ideas. But it is not a closed system. It is a powerful engine of integration. Let us not starve it of fuel by shutting our minds to what is good in other approaches. Let us test our ideas in open debate. If we are right, we have nothing to fear; if we are wrong, we have something to learn. Above all, let us encourage independent thought among ourselves. Let us welcome dissent, and the restless ways of the explorers among us. Nine out of ten new ideas will be mistakes, but the tenth will let in the light.

—David Kelley