

Let's Talk Politics

by Rodney Schroeter

Get together with friends, relatives, or coworkers, and there's much to talk about. Career changes, family developments, or sports.

But talking *politics*? Are you *kidding*? Why start trouble?

When politicians "debate," or when people discuss "politics," it often degenerates to the level of a Three Stooges pie fight of name-calling and insults hurled back and forth.

I like the Three Stooges. I also find the chaotic emotionalism that people call "talking politics" contemptible. So I understand why some people turn away from "politics" with revulsion and want nothing to do with it.

The mistake here is thinking that conducting these verbal (oops—I almost said "intellectual") pie fights *is* politics. *It is not.*

I challenge those holding the Three Stooges view of politics to re-examine 1) what politics is (content); and 2) how to discuss it (method).

I consider politics to be not some trivial popularity contest, based on who hurls the loudest insults. Rather, it's an important issue that every sane, living person must confront—and will be confronted by. Politics determines, quite literally, whether you live or die.

You can ignore the field. But others will not. And whatever ideas they promote will eventually come up on you from all sides, unnoticed and unopposed, because you've tuned out their advances (or very existence). When it's no longer a silly name-calling game, but a force that has your life in its grip, it might be impossible (or extremely difficult) for you to do anything about it.

Freedom of expression is becoming increasingly threatened, in many countries that are otherwise mostly free. To whatever degree free speech exists, you *can* do something about political (and other cultural) trends. To that end, I believe *more* political discussion is needed. With a certain approach in content and method, you can have a substantial, even enjoyable conversation on the topic with (as you find appropriate) friends, relatives, and co-workers.

Background

I proposed a politics-themed article on Objectivism and Ditko to Rob Imes *eight years* ago. Two things he said surprised me.

First, he didn't think Ditko would appreciate speculation on his political views. *That*

was interesting. Rob seemed to think, "Ditko wouldn't want us to speculate on whom he's voted for." I thought, "Ditko's plainly stated his political views, many times. We don't have to speculate."

Second: Rob asked me which then-presidential candidate an Objectivist would endorse. I surprised him by responding that I didn't think Objectivist principles could answer that. I think explaining that could have some value.

Disclaimer

I am not an official spokesperson for Objectivism. As far as I'm concerned, there hasn't been one since Ayn Rand, who originated the philosophy, died in 1982.

I believe I have a good, working understanding of Objectivism for day-to-day living.

I compare that statement to anyone saying, "I have a good layman's understanding of chemistry." There is no "official spokesperson" for chemistry. Discoveries are made in the field and are open to any person's scrutiny. The person discussing chemistry, whether layman or expert, demonstrates by his statements whether he understands the subject or not. If he makes an honest error, or a blatant falsehood, he is subject to challenges from those familiar with chemistry on any level (who are in turn open to the same challenges, etc.). The field is open even to those who question the entire field's basis, or validity—but at that point, the discussion ranges wider than just chemistry.

(Analogies are imperfect, at best—the above included.)

In *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, Leonard Peikoff described Objectivism's entire structure. It's perfectly fair, if you're not familiar with Objectivist principles, for you to view certain statements in this article as arbitrary and unproven. I don't expect you to take them on faith. But instead of making this essay longer than it is, I just refer you to that book. (Or contact me, if you can't find your question there or elsewhere.)

A quicker, online source is *The Ayn Rand Lexicon*: aynrandlexicon.com (excellent, for example, in looking up a term like "arbitrary").

Some of what you read here is my understanding of Objectivist principles. Some are my own conclusions, preferences, and applications thereof.

I'll mention other books, here and there, for further inquiry.

Methods

I've mentioned content and method. They complement each other, and will become more integrated as you use them properly.

A few suggestions on method:

Stick to principles, not personalities. Ideas, not insults. Don't name names (of candidates), at least not at first. Discuss the principles, then when it's right, ask, "Who best represents those principles?" (Unfortunately, it might be "Nobody," for the principles you conclude are desirable.)

Ask, "What is your view?" Keep them focused on principles. Keep asking questions for clarification; rarely, if ever, can you grasp a complex viewpoint from one or two sentences (though people often assume they do, in online discussions). Then you can say, "OK, here is my view."

Don't shout. Don't call names or throw insults. My own rule is that the first who does has surrendered the discussion by confessing their views have no substance.

Don't accept (or use) the arbitrary. Make them support what they say. You do the same.

Since the arbitrary is so common, I should give an example. Attending a convention each year, I meet a certain disagreeable person. A few years ago, he/she said, "85% of all people are too stupid to run their own lives." Last year, he/she said, "Remember, 90% of all people are just stupid."

I could have asked, "What changed in recent years? What caused the 5% rise in stupidity?"

But I won't ask, for the same reason I didn't ask about the original 85% figure. It's an arbitrary statement, not based on anything. He/she obviously pulled the numbers out of his/her—well, let's keep it clean and say "imagination."

An arbitrary claim should be challenged. If there is nothing to support it, you're entitled to dismiss it.

But with a claim like this, it can be helpful for your own understanding to ask: "What could be used in evidence to support or refute that claim? Even if I don't use a precise number, can I find a basis to conclude that *most* people are capable or incapable of running their own lives?"

An answer to a question like that might not come right away.

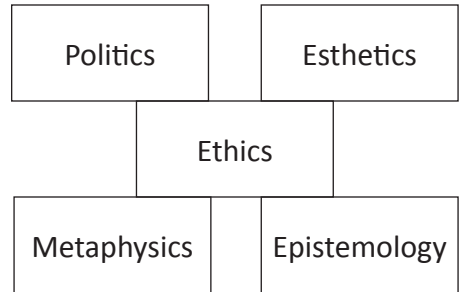
Principles—the foundation

In the 1940s, Ayn Rand wrote a brief article, "Textbook of Americanism." (This can be easily found online.) She identified the two most basic, mutually exclusive principles in politics: individualism and collectivism.

But I can't start with politics. There are earlier, antecedent branches of philosophy on

which politics stands. Taking different directions in an earlier branch leads to different directions in politics.

Ayn Rand identified five branches of philosophy. I find it helpful to visualize these five "branches" as building blocks, structured thus:



At the base, closest to perception, are metaphysics (the nature and laws of existence) and epistemology (the nature and validation of knowledge). They're closely related, so (like method and content) while they're two different things, it's hard to discuss or contemplate one without the other.

In metaphysics, Objectivism holds that there is an existence; that everything that exists has an identity.

In epistemology, Objectivism considers human consciousness to be qualitatively different from other (known) forms of consciousness, in that the human mind forms concepts. Concepts are the basis of knowledge. A valid (or essentially correct) view of concepts leads to human progress and the rise of civilizations. Without a valid theory of concepts, civilizations collapse.

Let's take two different conclusions in metaphysics and epistemology, and see how they take different directions when we go up the hierarchy of philosophy and reach politics. (These two simplistic examples obviously do not exhaust all possible options.)

Person A looks at reality, sees many individual lives of a certain kind, and forms the concept "man." The metaphysical aspect is that individuals exist. The epistemological, that an objective process of human consciousness was performed, leading to the concept (what is common to all) of "man." Though it is based on reality, the concept itself is a product of consciousness.

Person B looks at reality, sees individual lives, and forms the concept "man." But Person B considers the concept to have an actual, intrinsic identity out there in reality, aside from his consciousness. And this concept has a higher, greater existence than any one individual which is part of that concept. Person

B concludes, “We are all one.” The individual unit is of lesser importance, compared to... it depends; it could be the collective, the race, the nation... or “Society.” To person B, Society is more than a concept; it actually exists.

Combining metaphysics and epistemology, there are three basic options of how concepts relate to reality. Again, these three do not cover all options, but they’re the most common.

Intrinsic. Assumes that any processing done by the human mind distorts reality; therefore, reality cannot be known by the mind. Processing should be avoided. True knowledge will just come to you. Sense perception happens automatically; understanding of reality should happen the same way. Clear your mind, be receptive, and understanding will come.

Subjective. Assumes that any processing done by the human mind distorts reality; therefore, reality cannot be known by the mind. The content of a human mind was created by that mind, and we have no way to know whether or how it conforms to reality “out there.”

Objective. Ayn Rand did not originate the concept of objectivity, but she built on it. Based on perceptions of reality, concepts are formed by a method consistent with human consciousness and with reality. Some people believe Objectivism takes its name from “objective reality,” but the term really applies to epistemology, to concept formation.

One very general example of intrinsicism is religion.

Subjectivism can be personal—Anything is permissible if I want it. In pure forms, this is recognized as mental illness and/or sociopathy. More commonly, subjectivism is social. I once heard a professor define a “fact” as a “socially accepted truth.” A very general example is unlimited democracy—Anything is permissible if the majority wants it. Get that? One person saying, “I determine what is real”—that’s just plain nuts, anyone can see that. But a mob saying, “We determine what is real”—why, that makes perfect sense, because we have to know what’s real, and what to do about it, somehow.

The subjective, intrinsic, and objective are treated in detail in Leonard Peikoff’s book, *Understanding Objectivism*. One point is pertinent here. He said there is animosity between the intrinsic and subjective. In the thirty years since I read that, I think I’ve seen many examples. The specific animosities between the religious (intrinsicist) portion of the right and the subjectivist portion of the left in American politics sometimes seems easier to understand with these principles in mind. (Also easier to understand in terms of intrinsicism and subjectivism are views of each, on specific social

issues.)

The objective approach: Well, that is more common than you might think. It’s present wherever people choose to be objective, as far as they know how. The entire philosophy of Objectivism, however, is a structured integration of all branches of philosophy. To whatever degree human effort benefits human life in a non-contradictory way, to that degree objectivity is (usually) being applied. In societies advanced enough that things work for the most part, I would say there is a great deal of objectivity being practiced. (And I would give those societies as evidence to refute he/she who believes whatever high percentage of people are too stupid to run their own lives.)

Ethics

The third branch of philosophy, built upon the previous two (and, by implication, at a higher level of abstraction), is ethics. Based on the fact that I exist and have a certain nature, and can discover things about existence (including myself), what should I do about it?

A non-conceptual consciousness is hard-wired to sustain its life and perpetuate its species; it has no need of ethics. A conceptual conscious (man’s being the only one we know of) needs ethics to know what to do.

One question ethics addresses: Who should be the *primary* beneficiary of one’s actions? Person A, considering the individual to have actual existence, could conclude that each individual who chooses to think and act should be the beneficiary. Rand called this rational self-interest. A recent book by Peter Schwartz, *In Defense of Selfishness*, treats this subject exhaustively, including many political ramifications.

Person B could conclude that each lesser individual should work for the greater good, Society.

One notable difference: Person A believes ethics is needed, even if a person is isolated from everyone else. Facing reality or not; acting to advance one’s own life or not; Person A considers these ethical issues. Person B often doesn’t believe ethics exists outside of a social context.

Rights

Objectivism holds that the conceptual nature of human consciousness, the fact that humans have free will, leads to the need for ethics and the concept of an individual’s rights in a social context. This is an objective view of rights.

One example of an intrinsic view of rights would be that they come from a creator. Of course, that same creator can take those rights away at any time (as interpreted by those who

speak for the creator).

One form of a subjective view of rights would be that Society gives individuals rights. Again, if Society feels like it, those rights can be revoked (as interpreted by the enlightened 15% or 10% who *are* able to run their own lives—and everyone else's).

But under intrinsicism or subjectivism, rights sometimes don't even come up. If you are expected to submit to and serve a creator, you have no business asserting your own judgement or goals. If your purpose in life is to serve Society, independent thought and selfish plans for your own life are evil, to be squashed. With either approach, if your inadequate individual mind is incapable of understanding reality, and knowing the True Truth, why should you have any rights?

Politics

At this point, you will easily understand the difference between Objectivism and Libertarianism.

The term "Libertarian" is used loosely in today's culture, but the actual movement as it defines itself is to start with liberty, no matter how you arrived at it. In other words, "Liberty is valid because I want liberty." That's subjectivism.

If a person says, "Humans have liberty. That's self-evident. Liberty needs no validation," that's intrinsicism.

Hm.

Objectivism holds that, just as you can't start with the goal of "human health" without recognizing the hierarchy of knowledge it rests on (anatomy, biology and chemistry, for instance), you can't start with politics without always keeping in mind what it's based on.

Politics comes up in a social context. It asks how individuals ought to relate to each other.

Person A takes an individualist approach. A person exists; his life and mind are part of his existence. To live with others, and maintain the integrity of each person's existence, the rights to life and liberty are recognized, and a government is set up to protect those rights. The recognition of one individual's rights implies that each individual should recognize the rights of every other individual. Anyone who chooses to violate another's rights (by initiating force)



Rights for me, but not for thee. From Avenging World.

is subject to the laws of that government.

Person B would take a collectivist approach. A person exists, but only to serve Society. Society has precedence over any individual, and can dictate to the individual how to live. And—it might or might not go this far—Society can dispose of as many individuals as necessary, to keep Society "pure."

The fifth branch

Oh, you're wondering about Esthetics? It doesn't relate to politics, but... here's one way it

could.

According to the diagram, Esthetics does not rest hierarchically on Politics. Can you think of any instances, at a cultural or individual level, where Esthetics (art) *would be* hierarchically based on Politics? Can you come up with reasons why Esthetics *should* or *should not* be placed atop Politics?

Fiction points to reality

Science fiction can sometimes make good real-life points. For this topic, the movies *Blade Runner* and *Avatar* have something to tell us.

In *Blade Runner*, artificial super-beings were created. Being non-human, they were used as slaves. But they were conceptual. They had free will, and therefore their rights should have been acknowledged.

In *Avatar*, non-humans were dislocated from their land and killed. But they, too, were conceptual, and should have had rights.

A civilization not recognizing the rights of replicants or Pandorians would have to be very mixed (where those who reject rights are given power to take such actions), or in its infancy (not advanced enough to understand the basis of rights) or in its decline (in the process of turning away from rights).

Any real-life similarities come to mind?

Ditko's politics

Ditko's political viewpoints are unambiguously presented in a number of his works.

He considers individuals to exist. He views reason and logic to be individual activities. He upholds the rights of the individual to exist for his own sake.

One thing you can't miss, if you're familiar with Ditko's self-written work, is his view of

THE NEO-NEUTRALIST.... SELECTIVITY, THE RULE!



From Avenging World. Pages like this leave no doubt in the reader's mind, as to what Ditko's political views are.

how individual rights are violated: by the initiation of force (or fraud, which is an application of initiated force).

This is a principle in Objectivism. Initiation of force and mutual consent are opposites. Black and white.

Or... are they?

The whole black-and-white issue is not always well understood, including by people just learning Objectivism.

If the non-initiation of force is a moral absolute, you'd think it would never be morally/politically acceptable to punch a person in the face with the intent of stunning him into

THE COMMON GOOD DEMANDS SACRIFICE! IT IS THE COLLECTIVE, THE PEOPLE THAT MUST BE SERVED. NOT THE SELFISH INDIVIDUAL. ONCE EVERY MAN IS PLACED IN A SOCIAL ROLE, SOCIETY WILL FUNCTION WHERE ALL REACH AND ENJOY THE COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE OF SERVING AND BEING SERVED EQUALLY!



HOW DOES EVERYONE DECIDE WHEN AND HOW TO BE EQUALLY SACRIFICED? AN INDIVIDUAL WOULD ASK... BY WHAT PRINCIPLE. RIGHT... IS CANONICALISM JUSTIFIED AS A MORAL GOOD?

Three consecutive panels from Ditko's J Series, 1973, reprinted in *The Ditko Collection Vol. 1*, and *Avenging World*. The entire hierarchy is found in this exchange—from metaphysics and epistemology, to ethics, to politics.

unconsciousness.

But suppose you're an expert swimmer. You swim up to a drowning man. He's flailing his arms in panic. You clip him on the jaw; he relaxes; you pull him safely ashore.

Does that mean a moral principle is absolute—except for when it's not?

No, it means there are certain conditions—a *context*—to consider. The above example is a very specific type of context. See the entry for "emergency" in *The Ayn Rand Lexicon*; or "The Ethics of Emergencies" in *The Virtue of Selfishness*.

Similarly, living in a free society or in a dictatorship are two vastly different contexts.

Within the context of typical day-to-day activity in a free society, it is never acceptable to initiate force. On that, there is no compromise.

There is so much I've learned about principles and their role in human life since I wrote an article, "Black and White," for an issue of *Ditkomania* over 30 years ago. Could I write a better article on the subject now? Perhaps.

Choosing a president

By the very nature of Objectivism, and what it means to be an Objectivist, every Objectivist would agree on certain basic principles.

Within those basic principles, there are personal options and preferences on how to apply

BAH! YOUR PRECIOUS INDIVIDUALS NEITHER KNOW NOR CARE WHAT IS TO HIS BEST INTEREST... HIS GREEDY WANTS ONLY PRODUCE EXPLOITATION.. MISERY AND INJUSTICE! BUT A COLLECTIVE GOOD THAT TRANSCENDS THE INDIVIDUAL AND UNITES ALL AS ONE WILL STOP AND ELIMINATE THE EVIL CREATED BY THE "I" AND "MINE" ONLY THE UNSELFLESS "WE" CAN ACHIEVE THE GOOD!



IF "MY" ACTIONS ARE SELFISH..WRONG..HOW DO THE ACTIONS OF A "WE" BECOME RIGHT? HOW DO YOU THINK OR ACT AS A PEOPLE..AN UNSELFISH WE?

YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND COLLECTIVE LOGIC! ONCE MEN FOR THEIR OWN GOOD SACRIFICE THEIR INDIVIDUALITY FOR HUMANITY, ACCEPT OBEDIENCE DUTY AND JOIN THE COLLECTIVE..THEN, INDIVIDUAL EVILS: SELFISHNESS, GREED, EXPLOITATION AND INJUSTICE ARE ELIMINATED!.. THE COLLECTIVE CANNOT BE SELFISH..THE ALL CANNOT EXPLOIT ITSELF!



..HOW DOES THE "ALL" ARRIVE AT THE TRUTH..HOLD POWER..DECIDE, GIVE ORDERS? ALL TO AND BY ALL..AND NO OPPOSITION!

(5)

them. I have concluded that the number of distinct ways a person could apply the totality of Objectivism to the totality of his/her life is equal to the number of people who have lived in the past, are now living, and will live in the future.

Two people in agreement on the basic principles of Objectivism won't necessarily agree on how to apply those principles to a specific situation.

One example is deciding who would

make the best President of the United States. (I hope readers in other countries that hold elections can see relevant similarities.)

While the principles are pure and black-and-white, the situation those principles are applied to are often mixtures. That doesn't mean the principles are invalid, or useless; you wouldn't know you're dealing with a mixture unless you did so with opposing principles.

Ayn Rand often wrote that it was too early to promote better ideas by starting at the political level. She thought education in the branches of philosophy leading up to politics was a pre-requisite to advocating laissez-faire capitalism.

Presidential candidates of the past few decades present such a complex mixture that I don't believe Objectivist principles can determine, "This one's the best." Not even, "This one's the least worst."

It's impossible, in some cases, because we're trying to predict the future actions of people who are unprincipled. Such "pragmatic" politicians flip-flopping, reverse, and turn themselves inside-out. How is it possible to predict how good or bad a candidate will be, when they pick up or drop principles at whim?

Some specific examples.

In the 1972 election, Ayn Rand considered one mixture to be less dangerous than the other. She wrote: "If there were some campaign organization called 'Anti-Nixonites for Nixon,' it would name my position... The worst thing said about Nixon is that he cannot be trusted, which is true: he cannot be trusted to save this country. But one thing is certain: McGovern can destroy it." And: "It is *against statism* that we have to vote. It is statism that has to be defeated—and defeated resoundingly."

In 1980, Ayn Rand's contempt for Ronald Reagan as a non-intellectual, religious conservative was so great, that she did not vote. "There is a limit to the notion of voting for the lesser of two evils," she wrote.

(Objectivists can and do disagree on how to apply Objectivist principles, even with the philosophy's founder. I have read statements of positive regard for Reagan, from people I consider good, honest Objectivists.)

...BUT... WHY DID WE RISK OUR LIVES FOR EACH OTHER... ENEMIES... STRANGERS...!?



ONLY IN APPEARANCES! WHEN YOU BROKE DOWN, REVEALING YOUR PASSION FOR LIFE WAS THE SAME AS MINE, WE BECAME BROTHERS—BROTHERS OF VALUES!

From Ditko's J Series, 1973. The benevolent bond resulting from holding a non-contradictory view of individual rights.

In 2008, Craig Biddle, editor and publisher of *The Objective Standard*, started his article, "McBama vs. America," with:

"As the 2008 presidential election nears, and while John McCain and Barack Obama struggle to distinguish themselves from each other in terms of particular promises and goals, it is instructive to observe that these candidates are indistinguishable in terms of fundamentals."

He ended the article: "This November, I will abstain from voting in the presidential race and, instead, engage in intellectual activism."

(This article can be found online.)

Robert Tracinski, editor and publisher of *The Intellectual Activist*, wrote: "This is without a doubt the worst presidential selection we

have been forced to make in many decades. In choosing between Barack Obama and John McCain, we are truly required to choose the lesser of two evils."

Tracinski, however, came to a different conclusion than Biddle's. Tracinski considered McCain the better candidate, because in his view, McCain actually valued America.

In 2012, when the Republican candidate had not yet been selected, Tracinski took an "Anyone but Romney" stand. Once Romney became the candidate, Tracinski reluctantly supported him.

(Tracinski's commentaries can be found at thefederalist.com)

All this disagreement does not mean principles are useless. If Thomas Jefferson or his like were to come along, political principles would have a great deal to say about whether he would make a good candidate.

The Hitler card

A well-circulated Internet meme shows two photos—one, Adolph Hitler; the other, a currently popular politician. Under one is the quote, "Society's needs come before the individual's needs." Under the other, "We must stop thinking of the individual and start thinking about what is best for society."

I will admit to spreading that kind of thing around in the past. But at a point not too long ago, I came to see that kind of thing as not

being helpful in seriously discussing ideas.

(Also, per Snopes, a primary source cannot be identified for the quote attributed to the current politician.)

As I write this, candidates on both “sides” are being called “The new Hitler.”

If you find any of that worth considering, ask yourself: What does the speaker claim that Hitler and the candidate have in common? If the speaker’s in-depth commentary of 15 seconds (or less) gives no reason, dismiss it as arbitrary.

If you can identify the principles by which the two are being compared, consider if they’re *fundamental* enough to even be valid. If the two quotes were actually verifiable, each statement is as fundamental (root-level, at the basis of) as you can get, in politics.

Any current politician who advocates collectivism should be identified as such, because that is the principle that could lead to another holocaust.

I say “could,” because while collectivism is a *necessary* condition for a culture to collapse into a Hitlerian dictatorship, it is not a *sufficient* condition. I think those who compare a politician in the civilized world to Hitler don’t realize that (or don’t agree with it).

Acting on the principle of collectivism, those in power will take certain steps that violate the rights of individuals. It *might* get to the point of mass murder. It *has* happened in the past hundred years, numerous times.

But human beings have free will. Those in power might take away property and liberty...

but then have some shred of human decency to stop at murder.

They might stop short of that. But it’s better not to be in a situation where you count on that.

One of the most educational books I’ve ever read is *The Ominous Parallels* by Leonard Peikoff. It’s been recently re-released under the title, *The Cause of Hitler’s Germany*. It does an excellent job of presenting in thorough detail, what I’ve tried to do in this article. It shows how differences in the first three branches of philosophy lead to differences in politics. It contrasts the philosophical roots of America with that of Weimar and Hitler Germany.

Further reading

A tremendous amount of material can be found free, online. Many articles by Ayn Rand can be read, and many of her speeches heard, at aynrand.org.

Besides the books mentioned, there are:

Free Market Revolution: How Ayn Rand’s Ideas Can End Big Government, by Don Watkins and Yaron Brook. Also by these authors, forthcoming at the time of this writing, *Equal Is Unfair: America’s Misguided Fight Against Income Inequality*.

The work of George Reisman, an Objectivist economist, can be found at capitalism.net.

The DIM Hypothesis: Why the Lights of the West Are Going Out, by Leonard Peikoff. Not light reading. A good challenge for those who consider Objectivism to be a light-weight, pop philosophy that has added nothing to the history of ideas.