

Blockian Ethics

By Roy Halliday

In an article entitled "Heroes and Scapegoats", in the March 1973 issue of the *Libertarian Forum*, Professor Walter Block supplied his definition of libertarianism. According to the professor, there are two premises that define libertarianism:

- (1) "The basic premise of libertarianism is that it is illegitimate to engage in aggression against non-aggressors."
- (2) "... anything not involving the initiation of violence cannot be evil."

The first premise is widely accepted and Professor Block's explanation of it is very good. However, the second premise in this definition alienates all people who have any ethical principles beyond prohibition of crime. It estranges people of all religions and excludes non-religious people like Ayn Rand and Murray Rothbard who believes in an objective code of ethics. Can a definition of libertarianism that excludes Murray Rothbard be valid?

Why must libertarians refrain from making personal judgments beyond separating criminals and non-criminals? Couldn't a person accept the libertarian theory of justice and also be a Christian, Muslim, Objectivist, or Rothbardian? Despite what Professor Block may think, libertarianism is not a substitute for all religious and moral values. Libertarianism is not the alpha and the omega of life. It is simply the correct philosophy of justice and its only requirement should be the acceptance of Professor Block's first premise. His second premise defines a certain type of libertarian, a Blockian. We need not all be singleminded Blockians.

Being a libertarian means that we recognize everyone's right to be free from aggression. As individuals, we still may despise and regard as evil what some people do with their freedom. We do not have to approve all nonaggressive activities and pretend that mankind has learned nothing of life in all these centuries. Libertarianism does not mean that we must admire and regard as hero any social outcast who is not an aggressor. Only Blockian libertarians are so compelled.

Why has Professor Block chosen such a restrictive definition of libertarianism? It may be because he has misinterpreted or overextended the subjective theory of value. He has taken the subjective theory of value that explains how voluntary trade operates, and expanded its meaning to include that trade of any kind is morally good and objectively beneficial to society.

"Both parties must always feel they gain from a voluntary transaction. Given that they are free not to enter into the trade, the fact that they do decide to trade must prove to be a mutual benefit."

If trade is objectively good, regardless of what is traded, and regardless of the motives of the traders, then any person who overcomes great obstacles and takes unusual risks in order to complete a trade is automatically a hero. If someone engages in a socially disapproved form of trade (even if it is disapproved for good reasons) that social outcast is a hero. Blockian libertarians always must recognize as heroes precisely those social outcasts who are the most hated and reviled traders in society, even though the public may have good reason for disliking these non-criminals. If libertarians were all Blockians, the libertarian movement would be doomed to be as unpopular as the most despised "professions" in society.

Fortunately, most libertarians reject the premise that all trade is objectively good. Although, at the time of the trade both parties feel that they will benefit, they may be wrong. They may not both benefit from the transaction when it is judged from an objective point of view, or even from their own point of view reconsidered. The subjective theory of value operated smoothly in economic theory because economics is, and should be, a value free science. Professor Block makes the mistake of trying to treat ethics as a value free science instead of as the science of values. He assumes that people do not make mistakes in judgment and that their subjective values are objectively correct. Life is not so uncomplicated. *Praxeology* cannot take the place of ethics.

Professor Block dismisses charges that in real life his "heroes" actually do commit acts of aggression, by saying that though the charge may be true in any particular case, it is not necessarily true of the social outcasts' profession *qua* profession. Why, then, does he assume that

Blockian Ethics — A Reply

By Walter Block

The main contention between Mr. Halliday and myself seems to concern the ethical status of certain acts which are disapproved by various segments in our society. Acts such as masturbation, drunkenness, scrabble playing, suicide, heroin addiction, atheism, religious beliefs, homosexuality as well as the acts of my list of scapegoats (see the March issue). We both believe, I think, that such non-aggressive acts, or "victimless crimes" should not be considered illegal, as contrasted with aggressive acts such as murder, rape, theft, trespass, which should be considered illegal. We disagree, however, over my contention that "... anything not involving the initiation of violence (such as these non-aggressive acts) cannot be evil!"

I don't know how to settle this controversy in such a limited space other than for me to say "Yes, yes" and for him to say "No, no." I reserve the word "evil" for acts of violence against other persons, and Mr. Halliday uses the word in a less restrictive way. What I would like to do instead in this reply is to indicate why I think that all the criticisms of my forthcoming book that Mr. Halliday deduces from this disagreement simply do not follow.

1. The charge of exclusion. The Blockian Philosophy (heh, heh) does not exclude from libertarianism religious people, atheists like Ayn Rand, nor people like Murray Rothbard who believe in an objective code of ethics. On the contrary, I believe that the two premises quoted by Mr. Halliday constitute an objective code of ethics that has my full support. As for restrictiveness, I include both the followers of Miss Rand (atheists) as well as religious people as libertarians. (Many in each of these two groups, however, insist upon excluding members of the other group from the ranks of libertarianism.)

2. The charge that we must approve of these scapegoat heroes. I do not approve of many of the non-aggressive actions under consideration.

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anyone who hates and maligns his heroes is *ipso facto* opposed to the nonaggressive nature of the hero's profession, and why does he assume that everyone who criticizes his heroes wants to initiate aggression against them? In short, why does Professor Block assume only the best about pimps, blackmailers, and dope peddlers while he assumes the worst about their critics? There is nothing intrinsically aggressive about criticizing, disapproving, maligning, not associating with, or even hating someone who is not a criminal.

Professor Block gives the false impression that libertarianism means approval of vice and blindness to all ethical considerations beyond the nonaggression principle. A person does not have to be morally obtuse to be a libertarian. One may be a libertarian not because he believes all values are subjective, but because he believes that objective human values can be achieved best in a free society.

Free trade is not the answer to all of life's problems; instead, it is the framework within which we each can test ourselves against the inexorable forces of nature. If we defend the right of each to pursue peaceful activity, we have done our part. The natural consequences of vice will take their course. We do not have to regard drunkards, for example, as heroes. We must only defend their right to drink. We may still agree with William Graham Sumner that a drunkard lying in the gutter is exactly where he belongs.

In a stateless society, with no coercive means of enforcing mores, customs, propriety, and good taste, the role of social ostracism and other natural, voluntary means of keeping civilized values alive will become of paramount importance. Instead of joining the Blockians in defending the outcasts and dregs of society, the majority would disassociate themselves from despicable characters and, perhaps, even join the maligners of Professor Block's unsung heroes.

By portraying these people as heroes, Professor Block is wasting his talents on unworthy causes. He should be satisfied if he can prove that they are not criminals and that some of them are scapegoats. His book, thus far, does not represent the thinking of most libertarians and, if published in its present form, it will be a disservice to the libertarian cause. □

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Indeed, I abhor some. (Especially scrabble playing. This is especially distasteful to me. I agree with William Graham Sumner that "a scrabble player lying in the gutter is exactly where he belongs." — there is a slight misquote in Mr. Halliday's version).

But when these acts, however abhorrent, are prohibited by law, banned, and universally scorned, and when a practitioner of any of them insists upon his rights to do as he pleases without committing aggression against other people, I, for one, cannot help feeling a certain grudging admiration for him. (Although I admit that this is hard to do in the case of the scrabble player.) Even this low level of grudging admiration is not necessary to consider these non-aggressors as heroes, however. All that is necessary, I would contend, for an act to be heroic is that it not be intrinsically in violation of other peoples' rights, and that it be undertaken in an atmosphere of repression.

3. The subjective theory of value. I do not hold the view that all trade is "good". For example, trade among members of a pillaging band of criminals which enables the hoodlums to pillage at a more efficient rate can by no stretch of the imagination be considered a "good". I agree with Mr. Halliday that the subjective theory of value is beneficial in the sphere of value-free economics but not in the sphere of morality.

There is one thing though to object to in Mr. Halliday's statement concerning the praxeological view of trade: the necessary benefits of trade only occur in the *ex ante* sense, at the time of the trade according to this view. It is therefore an invalid objection to the praxeological view to say that both parties to a trade need not benefit from it "from their own point of view reconsidered". True, they need not. But the contrary was never asserted.

4. Mr. Halliday asserts that "There is nothing intrinsically aggressive about criticizing, disapproving, maligning, not associating with, or even hating someone who is not a criminal" (such as these non-aggressive "heroes") as if this is something that I would not agree with. But in the last issue of LF I stated:

"It is tempting to say that if there are any 'degenerate scum and social vermin' involved in this question, they are the people who cast aspersions on the economic heroes. Tempting, but incorrect. For we must remember that

people who maliciously cast false aspersions on others (libelers and slanderers) are heroes themselves, who are merely expressing their rights of free speech."

5. The stateless society. Mr. Halliday holds that in a stateless society my support of socially unacceptable behavior would be especially pernicious because without coercive means of enforcing mores, social ostracism would be called upon to bear a greater share in maintaining civilized views. Again, I agree with Mr. Halliday.

But in a stateless society there would be no prohibitions on the activities of those Mr. Halliday is pleased to call "dregs" and "despicable". And if there were no prohibitions on their acts, they could no longer be called heroes, according to my criteria! And if they were no longer heroes, and in need of protection from illegitimate prohibitions, there would no longer be any reason to defend them. After all, I have never, ever claimed that these acts are intrinsically heroic, or saintly. I have only claimed that these acts violate no libertarian codes of behavior, that they are prohibited nevertheless, that these people persevere under great duress, and that therefore they are heroic and ought to be defended.

The reactions of most libertarians to the series of "Scapegoats and Heroes" which have so far appeared in print have been most remarkable. They range from active acceptance to vigorous and sometimes even nasty rejection, with seemingly no middle ground. This is puzzling, to say the least. Also puzzling is that of Mr. Halliday's five criticisms of my paper, I have found myself in agreement with four of them. I agreed with him that 2) we need not approve of all the acts of the heroes; 3) not all trade is "good"; 4) there is nothing wrong with criticizing the heroes; and 5) there would be no need for defense of these scapegoats in a stateless (non-repressive) society. I only disagreed with his first point that I am overly exclusionary. Perhaps the disagreements are not as serious as they appear at first glance.

My usual reaction to criticism from people whose intelligence I admire which seems to me to be wide of the mark is to assume that there is a severe lack of communication, either on my part or on theirs, or on the part of both. And this must be my reaction in this case. Perhaps future publication of the articles, with criticism and rebuttal, will clear up the problem. Perhaps Mr. Halliday's reaction to this reply, and my reaction to his, may serve to clarify the situation. I am optimistic about this sort of outcome because, although in my own view all I am doing is tracing out the logical implications of libertarianism, I am fully aware that these deductions are taking some strange and new paths. Maybe all that is needed is time to get used to these new implications. □

The Editor Comments

First, I would like to rise to a point of personal privilege and express my conviction that Mr. Halliday need not worry about my being read out of the libertarian movement by Professor Block. On the contrary, Walter Block's "basic premise" is firmly non-exclusionist: it encompasses as libertarians all people who have arrived at the axiom of non-aggression, regardless of whether they have arrived at it as Christians, objectivists, emotivists, utilitarians, whim-worshippers, or from any other route. I agree with Professor Block's non-exclusionism, although, I believe with Mr. Halliday in a wider system of objective ethics, and believe ultimately that libertarianism cannot be firmly established except as part of that wider ethic. Hence, I reserve the right to try to persuade other libertarians to that wider view.

How about Professor Block's second premise, that evil is only the initiation of violence? Here I think it is possible to partially reconcile the Block and Halliday positions. It is a question of *what context* we are dealing with. I would agree with Block that, within the context of libertarian theory, evil must be confined to the initiation of violence. On the other hand, when we proceed from libertarianism to the question of wider social and personal ethics, then I would agree with Halliday that there are many other actions which should be considered as evil: lying, for example, or deliberately failing to fulfill one's best potential. But these are not matters about which liberty — the problem of the proper scope of violence — has anything to say. In short, *qua* libertarian, there is nothing wrong or evil about breaking dates, being gratuitously nasty to one's associates, or generally behaving like a cad; here not only do I join

Professor Block, but I would expect Mr. Halliday and all other libertarians to do the same. On the other hand, *qua* general ethicist, I would join Mr. Halliday in denouncing such behavior, while Professor Block would not.

In general, I join Walter Block in being surprised at the high resistance which has excellent series on "Economic Scapegoats" has been meeting among libertarians. Essentially, what he is doing is sharpening and heightening libertarian consciousness by saying: "Here is activity X; it is voluntary and therefore perfectly permissible for the libertarian, and yet it is scorned and outlawed in our society. And therefore, since a *hero* is defined as any man who proceeds with licit activity even in the face of scorn and coercion, the person doing X is a hero." What Block is simply doing is ringing the changes on this syllogism, applying it to the most shocking and seemingly outrageous cases he can find. And by doing so he drives home the essential libertarian lesson; considering the resistance he has been facing, even among dedicated libertarians, we see all the more the vital importance of Block's projected book.

One important point that Professor Block underlines but apparently needs to be emphasized once more: these scapegoats, by virtue of being outlawed for their licit activity, are heroes but they are not saints. Neither they nor their activity possess any intrinsic superior morality; they are only heroic because of the obstacles that government has placed in their path. Those who wish to remove the tag of hero from the pimp, the blackmailer, etc. should advocate the speedy legalizing of these activities. □