

Defining Isms

by
Randy Finch
(January 7, 1998)

With the recent coalition of Objectivists and Libertarians at the “Atlas and the World” celebration in Washington D.C., some people have been raising the question, “Is it appropriate for Objectivists to work with Libertarians?” This question cannot be answered without first asking: “Are Libertarian and Objectivist beliefs close enough to justify a coalition on certain projects?” and “What does a Libertarian believe anyway?”

In the August 1997 issue of the IOS Journal, Bob Bidinotto clearly defined the problem with determining what a Libertarian is when he said in response to David Boaz:

So whose is the true libertarian vision? What specific policies does the concept necessarily prescribe, or proscribe? Who may, or may not, rightfully refer to himself as a “libertarian”? Inquiring Objectivist minds want to know.

My inquiring Objectivist mind wants to know the answer to these questions, also. But my inquiring Objectivist mind also wants to know who can rightfully call oneself a Christian, a Buddhist, a Kantian, an Aristotelian, and, yes, even an Objectivist. You see, any group consisting of two or more people that fly an Ism flag faces the problem of defining the specific policies necessary to be a member of that group.

Suppose a man starts a new Ism, say Protestivism. Being a group of one, he can easily define the requirements of being a Protestivist. Now suppose a second person comes along and proclaims he is also a Protestivist, but his beliefs are slightly different from the originator of Protestivism. The originator might protest and say that this newcomer is not really a Protestivist because he does not meet all of the requirements set forth in the Protestivist Manifesto, which the originator wrote. The newcomer might say, “That is true, but I believe Protestivism needs to be flexible, making changes in its requirements as new insights are discovered.” Or he might say, “Not true. I meet the requirements exactly. It’s just that parts of the Manifesto can be interpreted in ways not even foreseen by the originator.” So, just as soon as more than one person claims to be a part of any given Ism, there is a problem with defining its requirements.

Objectivism is no different, as David Kelley and Leonard Peikoff can attest. It appears that Peikoff would like to make his view of Objectivism the defining one. His view seems to be that everything Ayn Rand said is set in stone (even if it contains errors) and that, given Rand’s departure from this world, *his* interpretation of what Rand said is the official one. Kelley believes that Objectivism would stagnate if defined in this way – that Objectivism needs to be somewhat flexible such that errors can be eliminated and new insights included while maintaining its basic principles. However, Peikoff and Kelley both call themselves Objectivists. Are they both right, or is one or both wrong? Who is the final arbiter?

When it comes to philosophies, coalitions, etc. in a free society, there really is no such thing as a final arbiter. Only a dictator-type, such as Jim Jones, who uses his power to lord it over others within his group, can be a final arbiter of such things. In a free society, anybody can claim to be a part of any Ism. Who's to question him? If challenged, the person can simply say there has been a misunderstanding about what it means to truly be a part of the Ism, and that he is a part of it whether anyone else agrees with him or not.

So how can anyone know whether he or she is a part of any group? It basically boils down to consensus. And a consensus is achieved through persuasion. If a significant number of people can be convinced that being a part of a particular Ism consists in believing and doing certain things, then a person will at least have some guidelines, although murky areas of uncertainty will most likely remain.

As an example, about 20-25 years ago Contemporary Christian music was coming on the scene. Traditional Christians believed the music was too secular sounding and thus of the devil. Anyone who played or listened to such music could not be a true Christian. Since that time, arguments to the contrary have been made and now hardly anyone questions the Christianity of people involved in this style of music. But yet, some murky areas remain. For instance, is a mosh pit appropriate at a Christian concert?

I believe there are four basic areas that people look at when trying to define what an "Ist" is. These are: beliefs (the basic principles that define the Ism and distinguishes it from other Isms), applications (how beliefs are applied to specific situations), actions (the things that are actually done as a result of applying beliefs in the real world), and strategies (the means by which one convinces others of the truthfulness of the Ism). Some people believe that agreement in only one of these four areas is essential to being an Ist. Some people believe that a combination of two or three is essential. Others believe that all four are essential.

For instance, some people think that only beliefs are important to being a Christian. On the other hand, I once had a friend who asked me, after I had rejected Christianity, why I didn't just accept it and live by it? By doing so I would protect myself in case the Bible was true. In other words, forget beliefs. Just act like a Christian and all will be well.

In the case of Objectivism, it seems that most Objectivists agree that certain beliefs, applications, and actions are essential to being a part of this philosophical group. And although Leonard Peikoff states as much, his rejection of David Kelley for speaking to a Libertarian group lets us know that he also believes that only certain strategies can be used by a true Objectivist.

So, what is true Objectivism? Unfortunately, as with Libertarianism, there is no consensus at this time. However, I believe Objectivists have a much better chance of building a consensus because their starting principles are much more consistent than that of Libertarians. Perhaps over the next 50-100 years, with much persistence, an Objectivist consensus can be built. Then, and only then, will we be able to state with confidence what it means to truly be an Objectivist.