

Why Be Rational and
Respect the Equal Rights of Others?

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Abstract

Why Be Rational and Respect the Equal Rights of Others?

This paper attempts to prove why we should act rationally and why we should respect the equal right of every individual to his own life, liberty and property limited only by the equal rights of others.

Rationality is defined as freely choosing to treat objective reality as it is. A proof is then offered as to why we should be free as opposed to being compulsive, and objective instead of self-delusive.

If we should be free limited only by the duty to treat reality as it is, then we have the right to be free limited only by the duty to treat other people as they are - i.e., as having the same or equal right to be free. Put more simply, we all have the right to be free limited only by the equal rights of others.

The equal rights to life and property logically follow from the equal right to liberty.

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All things are permitted if rationality is no more provable than irrationality, for everything can be justified subjectively. While the alternatives to rationality - purposelessness, violence, insanity, suicide - will not seem attractive to most people, there is a growing legion of contemporary novelists, dramatists (traumatists?) and drug addicts who seem far from repelled by these alternatives. This paper, then, will attempt to prove that we should act rationally and that all individuals have an equal right to their life, liberty and property, limited only by the equal rights of others. In fact, respecting the equal rights of others is the only social standard consistent with rationality.¹

Let us begin by defining rationality as the ability to freely choose to treat objective reality as it is. By "freely choose" we mean being able to prefer certain environmental or genetic influences over others and to act on those preferences within the limits imposed by our mental and physical abilities. Our culture limits our choices but it does not determine our every thought or action, nor does it obliterate our ability to make free choices within the limits it imposes. To the degree we are not free, we are compulsive, but compulsiveness is not considered rational either by the general public, philosophers or psychologists. For example, to the extent that a person is a kleptomaniac, he is not rational because he cannot freely choose his behavior.

Rationality also involves treating reality as it is, otherwise we would fall victim of delusionary behavior. For example, if a rosebush has thorns on it, a rational person treats it as having thorns, and if a road has cars on it, he treats

¹This paper is based on a full-scale study soon to be published as a book under the title of Ethical Certainty in a Changing World.

it as such. Perhaps he wants to injure himself, or perhaps he wants to remain happy and healthy; whatever his purpose, he still treats the thorny rose and the travelled road as they are; he treats reality as it is on principle, otherwise he would be a fit candidate for an insane asylum. There are inmates there who think they are Napoleon (perhaps Mao Tse-Tung is more in style these days) or that they are being persecuted by everyone precisely because on principle they treat reality - people, things, ideas - as they are not. Rational people do otherwise.²

Some object that we don't always know what objective reality is. What is the objective reality, for instance, of the Vietnam war or the U.S. welfare system? Well, surely these are complicated realities and honest men can differ in describing them. Nevertheless, difficult to describe or not, rational people always try to treat these realities as they are. Only a solipsist would deny this can be done or that independent reality doesn't exist at all.

Rationality is sometimes thought to be opposed to emotion, but this is not so. As we have defined rationality, there is no opposition between the two. A rational person will get emotional about many things provided his emotions operate within the limits of rationality already mentioned - freedom and objectivity.

But a definition is not a proof. We must still ask, why is acting rationally the true standard of behavior? The one distinguishing mark of such a standard is that it is completely consistent, involving no self-contradictions whatsoever (since inconsistency is meaningless, as for example, "pass the butter but don't pass it").

²We are not here concerned with Absolute Reality, whatever that may be, but just with those things which all but a solipsist would agree exist independent of our thinking about them.

If we err in understanding what a thing is and thus treat it as it is not, we are not for that reason irrational. We think it is something and we treat it that way - we have erred, perhaps, but we have not acted inconsistently. We only act inconsistently when we desire to treat reality as it is not - when we do so on principle, so to speak.

against Negroes, then I should treat a denial of equal access to public accommodations as one means for satisfying that desire; but if it can be proven that all individuals have an equal right to liberty, then I should respect the rights of Negroes to equal access (even though I may wrongfully choose to do otherwise). And so on.

The proof for freely choosing to treat reality as it is may strike some people as being cold, unemotional and therefore unconvincing. But passion would not provide proof, and once we can prove rationality, it then behooves us to be emotionally dedicated to living rationally. Emotion has its place in application, not in proof. The roundness of the world is no less true because it is a cold scientific fact.

We must next inquire how this dictum is to be applied to dealing with others. If we should freely choose to treat reality as it is, then this is equivalent to saying that we should be free limited only by the duty to treat reality as it is. If we should be free, then we have the right to be free, since a right is a rational claim to do whatever we rationally desire to do (or if you prefer, a claim to do whatever we are not rationally prohibited from doing).

But in this one fell stroke we haven't as yet arrived at the proof for equal rights, for if we stop at this point we accord people not liberty so much as license, or the freedom to do whatever they can and wish subject to no limitations at all.

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Why, then, should we freely choose to treat reality as it is? Because consistency requires it. Our actions should be consistent with our knowledge; to believe one way and act on a different belief is obviously inconsistent. Knowing is one type of action, and so if we act as if the Eiffel Tower were in Paris with regards to knowing where it is, and then simultaneously act as if it were someplace else, then both actions are simultaneously contradictory; and so we shouldn't treat reality as it is not.

Or we can arrive at the same conclusion by a slightly different route. By treating the Eiffel Tower as if it were elsewhere than in Paris, we are acting on the belief that it is elsewhere - we look for it in Florence, for example, expecting to find it there - although in another set of thoughts we know full well that in fact it is in Paris. By treating reality as it is not, we have set up a simultaneous contradiction in our beliefs which we can only avoid by treating reality as it is.³

The result of all this is inescapable: we should freely choose to treat reality as it is. This principle is not only rational but moral as well. It should become the guiding principle of all our actions. For instance, I should treat the door of this room as being the most expeditious means of exit; I should treat food as being able to satisfy my hunger; if I want to discriminate

³Some realist philosophers would require that in order to be true, a statement should demonstrate not only consistency but factual accuracy as well: it should contain only logical deductions based on accurate observations of reality. The statement "we should freely choose to treat reality as it is" obviously meets this additional criterion, since making accurate observations requires that we treat reality as it is.

A society based on such an ethic would allow each member to seize what he wishes and harm whom he can, even to the point of inconsistently violating the rights of others! Is this where rationality leads us?

No, because our right to be free is limited by the duty to treat reality as is. In dealing with others, we have the right to be free limited only by the duty to treat them as people who have the same right to be free as we do. Or put more simply, we have a right to be free limited only by the equal rights of others. Q.E.D.

Respecting the equal rights of others is not the only rational limit to behavior. Rational people are all the time recognizing limits imposed by their environment: they find it easier to walk around a large tree than through it, for instance, or if they wish to live they avoid walking off high roof-tops. Nor do rational people try to grow wings in order to fly or add two and two and get twenty-two. All this is involved in treating reality as it is. Not the least of the limits rationality imposes on us is the duty to respect the equal rights of others.

The right of life arises inevitably out of the right to liberty. If I have full liberty within rational limits, then within those same limits my life is my own to dispose of as I wish. In short, I have a right to it. Actually, it can be said that we die a little bit each time a particular right to be free is denied us, and we become a little bit more alive each time we more fully attain our equal right to be free. Deny altogether the right to be free and the individual is dead. Kill a person and his freedom disappears as well. Life, then, is the sum total of all our rights to liberty. Once establish the right to liberty and you have established the right to life as well.

The equal right to property also flows directly from the equal right to liberty. If we have the right to be free, we have the right to exert our labor to produce goods and services and we can then exchange our labor for the goods and services of others. This gives us the right to own what we get in exchange, and these things

then ethically become our property. Things justly belong to the person who made them or to those to whom he has freely given title; thus, labor is the primary justification of private property.⁴

So, for instance, when I work in a factory I am entitled to the wages I get provided that the marketplace is free and fair, by which is meant that neither my employer nor I were forced to enter into the wage bargain and that neither of us had a privileged position over the other (such as a too-assertive union might give me or monopoly might give him). I would be freely exchanging a just title in my labor for his just title in his money. We would be acting freely, which we have a right to do.

Some will object that a free market with equal opportunity for all participants does not exist. Certainly it doesn't exist in perfect form - no model does - but it can be approximated (via anti-trust prosecution, natural monopoly regulation or ownership, etc.) and it is our social duty to equalize opportunities in the marketplace as much as possible. Any other economic policy would necessarily lead to restrictions on our economic freedom and equality. In any case, the existence of a free market is irrelevant as to whether or not a person should own his labor and the produce thereof.

If the equal right to life and liberty exists, then so does the equal right to one's own property. John Stuart Mill wrote that "men might as well be imprisoned as excluded from the means of earning their bread." To the extent we deny a person the fruits of his labor, to that extent we deny him his life and liberty; deny property altogether and he dies either of starvation or exposure. In fact, the rights to life

⁴Of course, since land is not a product of human labor, then it cannot justifiably be made private property. However, private landownership can be justified if the owner transfers his land rent to the government (representing all of us) via taxation in payment for the privilege of owning land. Incidentally, urban tax experts recognize many distinct economic benefits in doing this.

and liberty are themselves rights to property - property in oneself. The three rights to life, liberty and property are thus inextricably intertwined.

There may be some who deny the right of property, but should you on that account attempt to take their wallet, you will find them resisting vociferously, albeit inconsistently.

Now let us consider certain problems of application. What do we do, for instance, when the rights of one person conflict with those of others? To resolve such conflicts, we should remember that life is the total of all our liberties while property is only one of the many liberties we possess. If we lose life, we lose liberty and property as well, and if we lose liberty, our property goes also. Where there is life, there is always the possibility of having our right to liberty respected, and while it is a serious blow to be denied our property, restitution will be made if our other rights are still intact. Thus, the usual order of listing our rights - life, liberty and property - reflects their proper order of precedence.

For example, we should respect the property rights of others, but it becomes morally permissible for the government to tax me and give the revenue to the handicapped or to those who, in this less-than-full employment economy, cannot make at least a subsistence income. I should have freedom of speech but not to sing "Sweet Adeline" on a streetcorner at four o'clock in the morning. Not even the right to life is absolute, no more than the other rights. In World War II, for example, the United Nations correctly chose to kill Nazi and Japanese soldiers because the only alternative was an even greater number of murders as well as destruction of liberty and property by those Axis powers if they were not themselves destroyed first. Killing is always immoral as an end in itself but it can be justified if it is the only alternative to even greater injustices.

Equal rights applies to the long-term goal we should always be aiming at. The most effective means for reaching that goal, however, will be affected by particular circumstances which vary with time and place. The most effective means will be those

which most advance society toward the ultimate goal of equal rights for all. We must remember that these rights are equal, not absolute.

Can the end justify the means, then? Most certainly, for how else can we justify our means if not by our ends? What are ends for but to justify means? Looked at another way, we cannot avoid deciding which of at least two alternative courses of action will most promote equal rights. To knowingly choose the least effective alternative is immoral. Nor should we make an unnatural separation between means and ends. The means are determined by the end and form a unitary continuum with it. Suppose, for example, that you are set upon in a closed room by a gun-wielding madman obviously bent on killing you, but in his excitement he drops his gun. You rush to pick it up and ascertain - correctly, let us assume - that the only way to escape his clutches is by shooting him. So you make the decision to do so; you pick up his gun; you twitch your trigger finger; he is shot in the shoulder; he is subdued and captured; the likelihood is that he will make no further attacks on strangers but unexpectedly he breaks out of confinement and becomes a social menace once more. Where did your action end? At the twitch of your finger? At the first moral consequence, his shoulder wound? Why not at the second moral consequence (his being subdued), or the third, etc.? It obviously makes much more sense to include all the expectable consequences in defining an action, at least when judging its morality. An action is moral, then, if its expectable consequences advance society in the direction of greater respect for equal rights, even if its immediate consequences (the means) are not respectful of equal rights.

To judge the morality of an action only by its immediate rather than expectable consequences is to commit Kant's error when he said he would refuse to tell a lie to save a life.

All too often, the end-justifying-the-means doctrine has been used to excuse monstrous intentions and crimes, but the fault is due to hypocrisy, ignorance and immorality, and not in choosing means appropriate to one's ends.

How do we know whether a means which is immoral in itself will eventually produce more good than bad? Alas, there is no litmus test here, for certainty exists only as to moral principle, not as to practical application. But there is no excuse for apathy. To choose to do nothing in the face of injustice or to choose ineffective means to combat it, which is much the same thing - there are acts also, acts which are destructive of equal rights and therefore immoral.

Yet we should be extremely wary of utilizing means which are intrinsically immoral. If the end is equal rights, a means which by itself leads away from equal rights is of questionable utility. Because we cannot be sure that more rights will be protected in the often uncertain future by the use of immoral means now, it is generally safer to err on the side of restraint in the use of such means.

Some people think to overturn the equal rights doctrine by claiming that rights are defined by society and emanate from society and have no existence if society ignores them. But they cannot really mean this for, in the words of Henry George, "...they are as ready as anyone else to say of any proposed state action that it is right or it is wrong, in which they assert some standard of action higher than the state."⁵ The state or society confer legal rights upon individuals, to be sure, but we have been talking about moral rights here. Hopefully legal rights will conform to the proven higher moral law.

Other critics assert that rights don't exist because they cannot be perceived by the senses. Since they cannot be seen, heard, felt, tasted or smelled, how do we know they really exist?

The answer is simply that while we test the truth of descriptive statements by accurate perception, we test the truth of ethical statements (which deal with human actions) by rationality. If we can show that respect for equal rights is consistent with rationality, we have met the only necessary test of ethical truth. People are

⁵Henry George, The Perplexed Philosopher (New York: Robt. Schalkenbach, 1892, 1946), p. 211.

not struck by lightning when they violate equal rights nor are they constrained by some mysterious force from so doing, but then neither do these things happen to people when they inaccurately describe some object in reality. No, the criteria of truth depend upon the type of statement we are making. In ethical statements, the criterion is rationality, with which equal rights is provably consistent.

If the case for equal rights has been proven, then we can expect at least these two important consequences to follow:

(1) Such a proof would strengthen whatever belief in equal rights we may have had before. It is one thing to believe in equal rights as a matter of personal whim or opinion, but that belief becomes much more intense and persuasive if we can offer a convincing rational proof for it. Democracy needs all the support that philosophy can logically give it.

(2) Such a proof would show that the world is not as chaotic and absurd as subjectivists and irrationalists often think it is. Rationality can provide a goal; there is a map for this wilderness of apparently meaningless facts. Who can be morally apathetic if a proven moral goal exists? Apathy and alienation are the products of a relativism which says that all moral standards are equally unprovable and worthless. Paradoxically, such a relativism can also lead logically to the opposite extreme of violence because if whatever I say is right, then whatever I do is also right, even violence. Only a legitimate proof of our moral values can philosophically undermine such extremes in behavior.