

Principles: The Hobgoblin of Little Minds?

[This is a (slightly edited) letter I sent to friends on May 24, 2010 together with an op-ed column in the *New York Times* criticizing the bourgeois “libertarian” Rand Paul. –S.H.]

Hi everybody,

I’m not trying to launch into a debate about “libertarianism” (because, for one thing, I don’t care to waste time participating in debates occurring among those who insist on remaining *within* the basic assumptions of, and solid support for, the exploitative and oppressive system of capitalism—i.e., liberals vs. conservatives and all that!). But I thought some of you might find the op-ed column about Rand Paul which I have appended below provocative. And it does raise an interesting question in political/moral philosophy regarding the issue of *principles* and *consistency* in upholding one’s principles.

Rand Paul, like almost all other libertarians the columnist says (and I agree), is shooting himself in the foot in part because of his insistence on *consistently* upholding his libertarian principles, at all times and in all circumstances, always and everywhere.

The author’s primary point seems to be that of Ralph Waldo Emerson: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do.” [From his essay “Self-Reliance” (1841).]

Emerson’s point is a good one if you understand it correctly, though it can also be taken to be support for pragmatism or even as the opposition to having any principles at all!

Principles *are* important, and we do need to have them and to generally follow them, both in morals and politics. We rightly despise those without principles (or with only weak principles) as opportunists, and that includes most politicians! Thus when some rare politician comes along who does have strong and sincere principles, it can seem like a breath of fresh air.

But consider, first of all, that many very evil people have also had very sincere principles. Adolf Hitler, for example, strongly held to the principle that the Germanic peoples were the “master race” and that other people counted for little or nothing in comparison to the Germans. Should we applaud him for his consistency on this matter? Well, actually of course, that principle would be very bad and absurd even if it were only upheld *inconsistently*!

Some of Rand Paul’s sincere principles are also reprehensible (in my view) such as his unqualified support for the exploitative capitalist system.

The first thing to determine about any principle is whether or not it is *generally* valid and appropriate to uphold. Then we can get into the matter of possible and appropriate exceptions.

Lenin remarked that anything, any idea or any proposal, can be pushed to a ridiculous extreme and then said that this is no argument against those ideas or proposals if they are *not* pushed to ridiculous extremes! This goes for virtually all of our moral or political principles too.

We favor the right of free speech, but we recognize that standing up in a crowded theater and yelling fire (when there is no fire) is a ridiculous extreme, an exception that we have to make with regard to this free-speech principle because it could very easily lead to the deaths of many people in this situation.

There is more disagreement about other possible exceptions to the principle of free speech. Those with fascist inclinations say that revolutionaries should be deprived of free speech by the “justice” system, and certainly we revolutionaries disagree. Of course, even if free speech by revolutionaries is not directly suppressed by the legal system, it is still mostly suppressed by the economic system (since the capitalists own and control virtually all the media). Similarly, we Marxists say that the right of free speech by the capitalists must be severely restricted after a socialist revolution, while the capitalists (and their supporters, and also confused well-meaning people) disagree about this.

So clearly there are disagreements (often along class or ideological lines) about many of the appropriate *exceptions* to the principle of free speech, as well as about the appropriate exceptions to any other principle or maxim. Nevertheless, the example of yelling fire in a crowded theater shows that there are *clear cases of valid exceptions* to good principles. *Any sensible person understands this!*

However, there are a surprising number of *non-sensible* people in the world, including many who are otherwise quite intelligent. There is a long history in philosophy and social thought in general of championing principles even to the point of absurdity.

Kant was probably the worst and most influential perpetrator of this intellectual crime. His primary abstract principle, that of the [categorical imperative](#), was that the only valid practical principles (or maxims) are those which are “unconditionally binding and which everyone must wish to become a universal law”. Thus he absurdly argued that lying is always and everywhere wrong, even in cases where lying might save an innocent person’s life! (That he was this foolish is disputed by some of his followers, but the evidence is clear. See for example Roger J. Sullivan, *An Introduction to Kant’s Ethics*, pp. 58-59. Of course Kant did try to weasel out of such predicaments, such as by erroneously claiming that it would always be possible to prevent the person’s death even without lying.)

There are really two points to make here: First, some principles are more important than others; and second, all the subsidiary principles (or maxims) have exceptions when they conflict with more important principles. (The dialectics of social maxims requires us to recognize exceptions at least when there is a conflict with a higher maxim. Thus overall there is no real inconsistency, though there is a purposeful inconsistency in the merely “general” upholding of secondary maxims.)

It is possible that there might be one overriding moral/political principle that truly does have no

exceptions. But this can't possibly be anything like the "categorical imperative". Personally, I have been unable to think of any exception to the following overriding principle: *What is good and right is that which is in the genuine beneficial interests of the people.* (But even here there need to be a few footnotes, such as talking about how the concept of "the people" in class society must be understood; about how the concept would have to be extended if we come across sentient extraterrestrials; about how we would reasonably justify the humane treatment of animals; and so forth.)

Nevertheless, with the probable exception of one central abstract ethical principle of the sort I mentioned (which is based fundamentally on the very *meaning* of the word 'good'), virtually all other specific principles and maxims in morals and politics must be understood to have—at least conceivably—some appropriate exceptions. Those who do not understand this are indeed educated fools.

In short, Rand Paul—besides being a racist, a pro-capitalist ideologue, and a demagogue—is just a plain idiot. However, personally I generally welcome idiocy in the enemy camp! Can it be a bad thing if he is helping to discredit the proto-fascist Tea Party movement?

Scott

The New York Times

May 23, 2010

The Principles of Rand Paul

By ROSS DOUTHAT

No ideology survives the collision with real-world politics perfectly intact. General principles have to bend to accommodate the complexities of history, and justice is sometimes better served by compromise than by zealous intellectual consistency.

This was all that Rand Paul needed to admit, after his victory in Kentucky's Republican Senate primary, when NPR and Rachel Maddow asked about his views of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. "As a principled critic of federal power," he could have said, "I oppose efforts to impose Washington's will on states and private institutions. As a student of the history of segregation and slavery, however, I would have made an exception for the Civil Rights Act."

But Paul just couldn't help himself. He had to play Hamlet, to hem and haw about the distinction between public and private discrimination, to insist on his sympathy for the civil rights movement while conspicuously avoiding saying that he would have voted for the bill that outlawed segregation.

By the weekend (and under duress), he finally said it. But the tap-dancing route he took to get there was offensive, tone deaf and politically crazy.

It was also sadly typical of the political persuasion that Rand Paul represents.

This persuasion shouldn't be confused with the Tea Party movement, whose inchoate antideficit enthusiasms Paul rode to victory last Tuesday. Nor is it just libertarianism in general, a label that gets slapped on everyone from Idaho militia members to Silicon Valley utopians to pro-choice Republicans in Greenwich.

Paul is a libertarian, certainly, but more importantly he's a particular kind of a libertarian. He's culturally conservative (opposing both abortion and illegal immigration), radically noninterventionist (he's against the Iraq war and the United Nations), and so stringently constitutionalist that he views nearly everything today's federal government does as a violation of the founding fathers' vision.

This worldview goes by many names, including "paleoconservatism," "the old right" and "paleoliberalism." But its adherents — Paul and his father, Ron, included — view themselves as America's only true conservatives, arguing that the modern conservative movement has sold out to both big government and the military-industrial complex.

Instead of celebrating the usual Republican pantheon, paleoconservatives identify with the "beautiful losers" of American history, to borrow a phrase from the paleocon journalist Sam Francis — the [anti-imperialists](#) who opposed the Spanish-American War, the libertarians who stood athwart the New Deal [yelling "stop,"](#) the [Midwestern Republicans](#) who objected to the growth of the national security state after World War II. And they offer an ideological synthesis that's well outside either political party's mainstream — antiwar and antiabortion, against the Patriot Act but in favor of a border fence, and skeptical of the drug war and the welfare state alike.

In an age of lockstep partisanship, there's a lot to admire about this unusual constellation of ideas, and its sweeping critique of American politics as usual. There's a reason that both Rand and Ron Paul have inspired so much visceral enthusiasm, especially among younger voters, while attracting an eclectic [cross-section of supporters](#) — hipsters and N.R.A. members, civil libertarians and Christian conservatives, and stranger bedfellows still.

The problem is that paleoconservatives are self-marginalizing, and self-destructive.

Like many groups that find themselves in intellectually uncharted territory, they have trouble distinguishing between ideas that deserve a wider hearing and ideas that are crankish or worse. (Hence Ron Paul's obsession with the gold standard and his son's [weakness for conspiracy theories](#).)

Like many outside-the-box thinkers, they're good at applying their principles more consistently than your average partisan, but lousy at knowing when to stop. (Hence the tendency to see civil rights legislation as just another unjustified expansion of federal power.)

And like many self-conscious iconoclasts, they tend to drift in ever-more extreme directions, reveling in political incorrectness even as they leave common sense and common decency behind.

It isn't surprising that two of the most interesting "paleo" writers of the last few decades, Francis and Joseph Sobran, ended their careers way out on the racist or anti-Semitic fringe. It isn't a coincidence that the most successful "paleo" presidential candidate, Pat Buchanan, opposes not only America's interventions in Iraq, but the West's involvement in [World War II](#) as well. It isn't surprising that Ron Paul kept company in the 1990s with acolytes who attached his name to [bigoted pamphleteering](#).

And it shouldn't come as a shock that his son found himself publicly undone, in what should have been his moment of triumph, because he was too proud to acknowledge the limits of ideology, and to admit that a principle can be pushed too far.