
Objectivism and Open Source

Shlomi Fish <shlomif@shlomifish.org>

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Revision 2895	28 September 2009	shlomif
	Corrected a lot of spelling/grammar/etc. problems.	
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	Converted to DocBook/5, changed more text to Commonwealth spelling and made some other corrections (“a software”, “constitutional”, etc.).	
Revision 1593	12 May 2008	shlomif
	Started keeping track of version. Changed the “book” schema to an “article”-based one. Changed more spelling to Commonwealth one. Changed the two-level of Ethics to “Ethical” and “Moral”.	

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Introduction

The “open source” movement is perhaps the most important phenomenon in the software world today. Thousands of developers and millions of users worldwide create, maintain, support and use high-quality software packages, that are made available for everyone to use, modify and distribute. Many Objectivists may reject this movement on the premises of it being anti-Capitalistic in nature. The aim of this document is to show that they need not and should not.

This document will demonstrate that working on open source software is not anti-Capitalistic, and that it is also an objectively moral and healthy activity. It will explain why there is no dichotomy between the

open source world and Objectivism, and why Objectivists can support it, without having guilt feelings of behaving un-Capitalistically.

What is Open Source?

Open source is a relatively new name for a relatively old phenomenon that is also called “free software”. (this term preceded “open source” but it too came a long time after the phenomenon emerged). I have written a previous introduction to this phenomenon [<http://www.shlomifish.org/philosophy/foss-other-beasts/>] which I advise to read if you’re not familiar at all with the term.

To sum up, an open source program is a program that is accompanied with its original source code and can be freely used, modified, and re-distributed without any charge. It is possible to charge money for a package that contains free software components, but generally it is not economical to base a business on it, because of the fact that it can later on be freely distributed.

Some of the landmarks of the open source movement are the GCC-based software development kit [<http://gcc.gnu.org/>], the Apache web-server [<http://www.apache.org/>] and other Internet servers, the Mozilla project with its Firefox browser and other applications [<http://www.mozilla.org/>], various high-level languages such as Perl [<http://www.perl.org/>], Python [<http://www.python.org/>], Tcl [<http://www.tcl.tk/>] or Ruby [<http://www.ruby-lang.org/en/>]; the X-Windows Graphics System [<http://www.x.org/>] and desktops built on top. There are also several operating systems whose every essential component is open source. They include the Linux (or GNU/Linux) Operating System [<http://www.linux.org/>], and some of the various BSDs [<http://www.bsd.org/>]

Open source software provides a low-cost, highly customisable, and often more reliable or technically superior alternative to commercial, non-free software. The open source world maintains an online web of mailing lists, web forums, IRC channels, web-sites and other resources with which people who are more knowledgeable in some respects help their less experienced peers.

What is Objectivism?

Objectivism is a philosophy put forth by Ayn Rand, and later further developed by others. It has a strong emphasis on individualism, objectivity and Capitalism. Objectivism is based on the premise that existence exists and is common to all conscious individuals independently of what anyone think it is. As such it rejects such notions as Subjectivism (that reality is subjective to any individual), and mysticism (that thoughts can alter reality).

One of the central themes of the Objectivism is that the conscious individual is an end to himself, and should strive to fulfil his own happiness and well-being. It demonstrates that by acting out of their rational self-interest , individuals best benefit others as well.

Similarly it believes that Altruism (advocating the must to contribute to an external cause) is a harmful notion that one has to reject from within and without. Objectivism does not oppose individuals voluntarily contributing time, effort, money or other resources to further the well-being of others. However, it demonstrates that claiming that you are only worthy of living if you help an external cause (the poor, your country, your religion, etc) is a harmful notion that has caused a great deal of strife in the world.

Objectivism Support Capitalism as the ideal way of running a country and vows for Laissez-Faire Capitalism, as the ultimate form of it.

About Neo-Tech

Neo-Tech [<http://www.neo-tech.com/>] is an idea system based on Objectivism that also incorporates Psychology and Business Management, and reaches even bolder conclusions. Summarising Neo-Tech is

not possible in this scope because the material put forth by it is huge. It's also not particularly relevant because this document is aimed at Objectivists (and non-Objectivists) who have not accepted Neo-Tech yet.

However, I will borrow some concepts and text from the Neo-Tech literature to demonstrate my points, and hope they will be commonly accepted enough by everyone.

Two Levels of Ethics and How Open Source Measures Against Them

There are two levels of Ethics: Ethos and Morality. An ethical action is such that is allowed under objective ethics. I.e: if you wish to perform it, then no-one can prevent you from doing it. It may not necessarily be a good action to take, but it is still allowed. A non-ethical action is such that will harm others and so is not allowed.

Now an ethical action is moral if it delivers genuine gain for you or for someone else. This distinction should be made because some ethical actions are very harmful (such as committing suicide or consuming harmful substances).^{Amoral}

The aim of this section is to show that working on open source software is not only ethical but moral as well.

Why Open-Source is Ethical

The best summary of what is ethical and what isn't can be found in the Neo-Tech Constitution [<http://www.neo-tech.com/neotech/advantages/advantage83.html>]. This document contains a preamble, followed by three articles, followed by 6 axioms. The articles are the most relevant and I'll bring them here:

1. No person, group of persons, or government may initiate force, threat of force, or fraud against the person or property of any individual.
2. Force may be morally and legally used only in defence against those who violate Article 1.
3. No exception shall ever exist to Articles 1 & 2.

The validity of this definition is self-evident. Now, based on it, what can we say about creating open-source software? It surely does not involve initiatory force, coercion or fraud. Working on free software is done voluntarily and its distribution does not involve harming anyone.

While vendors of commercial software may lose money or go out of business out of competition with open-source software, it does not constitute of force. Competition is one of the cornerstones of Capitalism. This is similar to selling a cheaper and/or better product at the marketplace and taking market share out of the competition.

Thus, creating and maintaining open source software is an ethical action.

Why Open-Source Development is Moral

Naively, some Objectivists may come to believe that working on open-source software is, while perfectly ethical, not a good action to take. "You work on software that the masses could use, and instead of selling

^{Amoral} Related to moral and ethical choices are amoral decisions. An amoral choice is a matter of taste and is neither moral nor immoral. Examples are: your favourite food, your favourite Ice-cream flavour, your preferences in members-of-the-appropriate-sex, your preference in music, etc.

it and earning a honest buck, you give it away to everybody, and have others benefit from your efforts. What's in it for you?" But let's first formulate a definition of what is moral and what isn't.

Again, I will extract a suitable definition out of the Neo-Tech text:

The meaning of moral in Neo-Tech is simple and direct: Whatever is consciously done to help fill human biological needs is good and moral (e.g., the productive actions of honest people). Whatever is consciously done to harm or prevent the filling of human biological needs is bad and immoral (e.g., the destructive actions of mystics and neocheaters).

The validity of this definition is also evident. So how Open-Source measures against it? Very well, actually. Open source software was so far used by millions of users worldwide, greatly facilitated some of the jobs they had to do with their computer, and generally contributed to everyone's well-being. The very action of creating a useful software for everyone to use is beneficial as it eventually can help fill human biological needs.

Now, some hardcore Objectivists can ask "But what about your own self-interest?". Self-interest here is relevant, but in subversive ways. The open-source developer does not economically benefit from the software he wrote, as much as he would, had he sold it commercially (and assuming it would indeed become successful). However, he does benefit, from having more potential users and co-developers, from making sure his software or one of similar vestiges will remain available as time goes by, and from a boost of happiness knowing that people are using your software.

Usually, getting a non-free piece of software to become successful would take a lot of effort on the developer's part, and you always risk a player with better resources competing with you. While it is itself beneficial as well, it may not yield the same immediate and long-term profit from working on an open-source package.

Beyond Morality: Why Open Source is Good for You

The reasons that make open-source a viable choice technically, psychologically and economically were already given in Eric Raymond's [<http://www.catb.org/~esr/>] excellent "The Cathedral and the Bazaar" series [<http://www.catb.org/~esr/writings/cathedral-bazaar/>]. In the first part, "The Cathedral and the Bazaar" [<http://www.catb.org/~esr/writings/cathedral-bazaar/cathedral-bazaar/>], Raymond describes the dynamics of a small "Bazaar-style" open-source project, and analyses why this system works so well for developing software.

In the second part, Homesteading the Noosphere [<http://www.catb.org/~esr/writings/cathedral-bazaar/homesteading/>] Raymond analyses the customs of the open source community. He demonstrates that because of the abundance of computer resources such as computing power, network bandwidth, hard-disk capacity - there is no scarcity economics involved in the Internet world. Instead, there is a gift culture, in which people are esteemed according to what they give away (namely, contributions to open source software)

The third part, "The Magic Cauldron" [<http://www.catb.org/~esr/writings/cathedral-bazaar/magic-cauldron/>] analyses the economics of the open-source world. It demonstrates why non-free commercial software is problematic and why open-source works so well. It gives several cases in which companies and individuals can utilise distributing software applications under open-source licences for their own commercial gains. He also dispels the myth that programmers will be out of job because of free software by noting that the majority of code in the world (and what the vast majority of programmers are working on) is code for internal use: in-house applications, customizations of programs, embedded software, software

that accompanies hardware, software that powers web-sites, etc. Such software has no sale value, and so its developers will not be damaged if open source takes over.

The whole series is a very recommended read.

Joel Spolsky [<http://www.joelonsoftware.com/>] later continued the Magic Cauldron theme in his essay Strategy Letter V [<http://www.joelonsoftware.com/articles/StrategyLetterV.html>]. He took the Micro-economics principle of complementary products, and showed why supporting open-source software can be a wise decision to make complementary products in greater demand. A complementary product is one that when it is in greater abundance, demand for its complement will become higher. For example, if flights to Florida became cheaper, then there would be greater demand for Florida Hotel Rooms. Open source software can be a complementary product to hardware or services involved in supporting it, which explains why companies like IBM or Sun are financing it.

Aside from all that, working on open-source software is a fun and rewarding experience. One becomes more experienced and learn a lot, interacts with users and co-developers (some of them living thousands of kilometres from where you are), and generally becomes happy of having done something useful.

Generally, the amount of work an open source developer invests in his software is vastly negligible compared to the benefit he makes out of the work of all the other developers. As someone once noted, in the open-source model everyone contributes a brick and in return everyone gets a full house for himself. By decentralizing effort, and splitting the development into a large number of well-defined projects, the open source world ensures that development is done at a highly accelerated pace.

Why the Apparent Dichotomy Exists in the First Place?

Finally, it's time to analyse why the apparent dichotomy between open-source and Objectivism exists in the first place. The most important reason is because some non-free software is sold, and because open source software is made available for everyone to freely use and distribute. So, we see the vendors of proprietary software as healthy Capitalists (which is true), and automatically deduce that open source software is anti-Capitalistic.

However, software is different in the fact that the cost of duplicating it and distributing it is virtually zero. A software developer is not encumbered if his software has 100,000 of users instead of just 1,000. While developing the software is time consuming, there is no reason not to share it after one has invested this initial time.

Some people may come to believe that sharing anything is bad. But as Eric Raymond notes in the excellent film "Revolution OS" [<http://www.revolution-os.com/>]: "Open source is voluntary sharing. Communism puts a gun against your head and forces you to share.". While sharing hammers or food does not make sense economically because such things take a positive amount of time to manufacture every unit of (albeit sharing them is still perfectly ethical), sharing software is not encumbered by these real-world constraints. That put aside, giving away something to your friends, was not held as illogical even by Ayn Rand herself.

Another element that hinders the acceptance of Open Source software is the belief that "if you want something good, you have to pay for it.". This myth does not hold in the software world, because an application can achieve good quality by incremental contributions from its voluntary developers. When a developer works on an application, there is the pure joy of creation and other social rewards, and it does not matter if he makes any revenue off selling the software. There is a similar case when developing other types of artwork.

Alternatively, the entity that pays the developer to write the program gains from other aspects of the software other than its sale value. (as previously noted).

The facts also speak for themselves. The Linux operating system and other pieces of open-source software (or for that matter freeware), have millions of users who can testify for their superior quality and working experience.

Open Source and Capitalism

Some may claim that the Open Source development methodology contradicts Capitalism: after all, a final product is produced, and given away for free. This is while the general theme of Capitalism is to competitively create values that are sold in the marketplace.

A bit bucket once produced and finalised (a procedure that may require a lot of money, effort and time), can be later distributed free-of-charge by electronic means, without causing loss to the originator of the bit bucket. This is as opposed to physical products such as food or tools, which cost money to produce and distribute each unit of.

Thus, it economically makes sense to distribute software or other bit buckets free-of-charge. The fact that vendors of proprietary software do it for money, does not preclude a costless alternative by someone else. Capitalism has endorsed distributing cheaper alternatives to products for a long time.

For a more thorough discussion of the economics of open source software refer to Eric Raymond's essay "The Magic Cauldron" [<http://www.catb.org/~esr/writings/cathedral-bazaar/magic-cauldron/>].

The Open Source Community and Collectivism

One of the corner-stones of Objectivism is its opposition to Collectivism. Namely considering a collective of individuals as more important than its individuals, or thinking that one should sacrifice the well-being or happiness of individuals for the collective.

The open-source world exhibits a very prosperous, active and often zealous community of users, contributors and advocates. Is this an instance of Collectivism?

No, it is not. Collectivism is not against forming collectives. Some collectives, like many countries, cities, and businesses, clubs and so on are or can be benevolent. The only problem comes when the leaders of the collective stress the welfare of the collective above the welfare of its individuals. This is generally not the case for the Open Source community.

Moreover, the members of the Open Source community are active there at will. There's no force, threat of force, or fraud directed at anyone to convince them to become an open-source user or activist. If people just use open-source software because of its benefits or lower price, without contributing anything back, it is considered OK and fully allowed by the licences of the software.

Thus, the open source community is not a collectivist phenomenon, and participating in it should not be regarded as such.

Document Information

About the Author

My name is Shlomi Fish and I am a user, developer and advocate of open-source software. I also use commercial software, if I need to, but usually don't enjoy using it quite as much as the open-source equivalents. I am also a firm believer in Objectivism and Neo-Tech.

You can learn more about me by visiting my homepage [<http://www.shlomifish.org/>].

Why this document was written?

I once searched Google for “objectivism open source” and came upon an article on Open Source written by an Objectivist in a three part series about the Microsoft trial. However, the article proved to be inaccurate and showed a general misunderstanding of what open source was all about.

This article aims to be a better attempt at the job, from someone who is an insider of the open source world.

Software Used in the Creation of this Document

An early incarnation of this document was written (and is available) in DocBook/XML, and was rendered into HTML, PDF, and Word RTF using the DSSSL stylesheets, OpenJade, and Jadetex and TeX. The process was managed using GNU make and the files were uploaded using the rsync program. The text itself was edited using the Vim [<http://www.vim.org/>] text editor. This took place entirely on a Mandrake Linux 9.1 system.

A later version was converted to use the DocBook/XML XSLT stylesheets, and rendering to the final PDF forms using Apache fop. It was later converted to DocBook 5, which is the new and improved DocBook standard.

All of the above are open source software.

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