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This issue of my Letter features our guest correspondent and Contributing Editor, Dr. Leonard Peikoff. It offers an excerpt from his forthcoming book, The Ominous Parallels, to be published by Weybright & Talley, Inc. For an earlier excerpt, as well as a brief summary of the book's thesis, see the December 4 and 18, 1972, issues of this Letter.

The present excerpt, from the chapter "Philosophy and America," is of special interest and importance to my readers, on two counts. 1. It deals with a subject which is all but obliterated today: the philosophic foundations of this country. While everyone seems to concede that the United States is different, in some unspecified manner, from all other countries, the deliberate obfuscation of its intellectual roots now permits any and every group to seek a cover of respectability by attaching the tag of "Americanism" to their own ideologies, most of which are diametrical opposites of the philosophy of the Founding Fathers.

In the 1930s, the Communist Party claimed that "Communism is twentieth-century Americanism." Modern conservatives claim that this country was based on religious faith and that a belief in God is the precondition of a free society. A Presidential candidate, George McGovern, claimed that the "American Dream" was an egalitarian Welfare State, in which material support is guaranteed to some men at the expense of others, and none is permitted to rise above a level set by the government. Today, observe the mean little obscenity of the fact that the coupons for the proposed gas-rationing plan bear a picture of George Washington.

Tradition as such is not a proof of an idea's truth or falsehood; anyone is free to challenge any tradition. What is reprehensible is the attempt not to challenge, but to distort - to smuggle one's notions into people's minds by misrepresenting a tradition that deserves the respect it has earned. What was the original philosophy that gave birth to the United States of America?

2. One of the questions I hear very often is: "If America's original philosophy was so good and so successful, if it gave rise to such spectacular achievements, why was it discarded?"

These are the two questions which Dr. Peikoff answers. In the grand-scale context of the history of ideas, his summary presents the essentials of America's philosophic base - and the cracks or missing elements that permitted its eventual destruction.

(We have omitted the footnote references for quoted material; these will appear in the book.)

Ayn Rand

AMERICA'S PHILOSOPHIC ORIGIN

By Leonard Peikoff

Since the golden age of Greece, there has been only one era of reason in twenty-three centuries of Western philosophy. It was during this era's final decades that the United States of America was created as an independent nation. This is the key to the country - to its nature, its development, and its uniqueness: the United States is the nation of the Enlightenment.

The progression of European thought from Aquinas through Locke and Newton, represents more than four hundred years of stumbling, tortuous, prodigious effort to secularize the Western mind, i.e., to liberate man from the medieval shackles. It was the build-up toward a climax: the eighteenth century, the Age of Enlightenment. For the first time in modern history, an authentic respect for reason became the mark of an entire culture; the trend that had been implicit in the centuries-long crusade of a handful of innovators, now swept the West explicitly, reaching and inspiring educated men in every field. Reason, for so long the wave of the future, had become the animating force of the present. For the first time since the high point of classical civilization, thinkers regarded the acceptance of reason as uncontroversial. They regarded the exercise of man's intellect not as a sin to be proscribed, or as a handmaiden to be tolerated, or even as a breath-taking discovery to be treated gingerly - but as virtue, as the norm, the to-be-expected....

In the early decades of the eighteenth century, the European Enlightenment came to America, gradually becoming the dominant philosophic power.

In every area of thought, the American Enlightenment represents a profound reversal of the Puritans' philosophic priorities. Confidence in the power of man, replaced dependence on the grace of God - and that rare intellectual orientation emerged, the key to the Enlightenment approach in every branch of philosophy: secularism without skepticism.

In metaphysics, this meant a fundamental change in emphasis: from God to this world, the world of particulars in which men live, the realm of nature. For centuries of medievalism, nature had been regarded as a shadowy, transitory reflection of a transcendent dimension representing true reality. Now, whatever the vestigial concessions to the earlier mentality, the operative conviction seizing men's mind was that nature is an autonomous realm - solid, eternal, real in its own right. For centuries, nature had been regarded as a realm of miracles manipulated by a personal deity, a realm whose significance lay in the clues it offered to the purpose and plan of its author. Now, the operative conviction was that nature is a realm governed by scientific laws, which permit no miracles and which are intelligible without reference to the supernatural. Now, when men looked at nature, they saw not erratic intervention from beyond (nor inexplicable chance nor Heraclitean flux), but order, stability, "eternal and immutable" principles - i.e., the reign of absolute, impersonal cause and effect.

In such a universe, the fundamental epistemological principle was the sovereignty of human reason. For centuries, men had sought primary truth in reve-

lation, submitting docilely to the alleged deliverances of supernatural authority, or - later - had sought a compromise between the domain of the secular intellect and the domain of faith. Now, the animating conviction was that the rational mind is man's only means of knowledge. Faith, revelation, mystic insight, the whole apparatus of Christian dogmas, mysteries, sacraments, etc. - these the spokesmen of the Enlightenment swept aside as the futile legacy of a primitive past. Reason the Only Oracle of Man, Ethan Allen titled his work, expressing the widespread viewpoint. "Fix reason firmly in her seat," writes Jefferson to a nephew, "and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there is one, he must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear."

Reason - according to the characteristic Enlightenment conception - is a faculty which acquires knowledge by derivation from the evidence of the senses; there are no divinely inspired, innate ideas. It is a faculty which, properly employed, can discover explanatory principles in every field, and achieve certainty in regard to them. Since these principles, it was held, are absolute truths stating facts of reality, they are binding on every man, whatever his feelings or nationality; i.e., knowledge is objective. It was not heavenly illumination or skeptical doubt or subjective emotion that the Enlightenment mind extolled ("enthusiasm," i.e., irrational passion, was regarded as the cardinal epistemological sin), it was the exercise of the fact-seeking intellect - logical, deliberate, dispassionate, potent.

The consequence of this view of reason was the legendary epistemological self-confidence of the period - the conviction that there are no limits to the triumphant advance of science, of human knowledge, of human progress. "The strength of the human understanding is incalculable, its keenness of discernment would ultimately penetrate into every part of nature, were it permitted to operate with uncontrouled and unqualified freedom," writes Elihu Palmer, a militant American spokesman of the period. "...it has hitherto been deemed a crime to think," he states; but at last, men have escaped from the "long and doleful night" of Christian rule, with its "frenzy," its "religious fanaticism," its "mad enthusiasm"; at last, men have grasped "the unlimited power of human reason" - "Reason, which every kind of supernatural Theology abhors - Reason, which is the glory of our nature..." Now, "a full scope must be given to the operation of intellectual powers, and man must feel an unqualified confidence in his own energies."

A being who has discovered "the glory of his nature" cannot regard himself as a chunk of depravity whose duty is self-abasing obedience to supernatural commandments. After centuries of medieval wallowing in Original Sin and the ethics of unquestioning submissiveness, a widespread wave of moral self-confidence now swept the West, reflecting and complementing man's new epistemological self-confidence. Just as there are no limits to man's knowledge, many thinkers held, so there are no limits to man's moral improvement. If man is not yet perfect, they held, he is at least perfectible: just as there are objective, natural laws in science, so there are objective, natural laws in ethics - and man is capable of discovering such laws, and of acting in accordance with them; he is capable not only of using his intellect, but also of living by its guidance (this, at least, was the Enlightenment's ethical program and promise).

Whatever the vacillations or doubts of particular thinkers, the dominant trend represented a new vision and estimate of man: man as a self-sufficient,

rational being and, therefore, as basically good, as potentially noble, as a value.

For centuries, the dominant moralists had said that man must not seek his ultimate fulfillment on earth; that he must renounce the pleasures of this life - whether as a flesh-mortifying ascetic or as an abstemious toiler - for the sake of God, salvation, and the life to come. With the new view of reality and of man, this could no longer be taken seriously. Now, a new concept of the good moved insistently to the forefront of men's mind: the purpose of life, it was held, is to live, to live in this world and to enjoy it. Men refused to wait any longer: they wanted to achieve happiness - now, here, and as an end in itself.

For centuries, whatever their concern with the individual soul, the medievals had derogated - or failed to discover - the individual man. In philosophy, the Platonizing Christians had denied his reality; in practice, the feudal system had (by implication) treated the group - the rigidly defined caste, the guild, etc. - as the operative social unit. Then, in post-medieval Europe, a dawning appreciation of the individual had appeared, in two different forms, in the Renaissance and the Reformation movements. Now, particularly in America, that generalized appreciation became a specific, ruling conviction.

Metaphysically - thinkers held - since reality is this world of particulars, the individual is fully real. Epistemologically and ethically, since reason is an attribute of the individual, the potency and value of man the rational being, means the potency and value of the individual who exercises his reason. Thus, when the Enlightenment upheld the pursuit of happiness, the meaning (Christian contradictions aside for the moment) was: the pursuit by each man of his own happiness, to be gained by his own independent efforts - by self-reliance and self-development, leading to self-respect and self-made worldly success.

The leaders of the American Enlightenment did not reject the idea of the supernatural completely; characteristically, they were deists, who believed that God exists as nature's remote, impersonal creator, and as the original source of natural law; but, they held, having performed these functions, God thereafter retires into the role of a passive, disinterested spectator. This view (along with the continuing belief in an afterlife) is a remnant of medievalism, but, in terms of its operative influence on the period, it is in the nature of a vestigial afterthought, which diminishes the role and power of religion in men's lives. The threat to "Divine religion," observed one concerned preacher at the time, was "the indifference which prevails" and the "ridicule"; mankind, he noted, are in "great danger of being laughed out of religion..."

The result of the Enlightenment ideas and attitudes, in every branch of philosophy, was a surging sense of liberation. "We have it in our power to begin the world over again," says Thomas Paine. "A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand..."

The father of this new world was a single philosopher: Aristotle. On countless issues, Aristotle's views differ from those of the Enlightenment. But, in terms of broad fundamentals, the philosophy of Aristotle is the philosophy of the Enlightenment. The primacy of this world; the lawfulness and intelligibility of nature; the reality of particulars and, therefore, of in-

dividuals; the sovereignty and power of man's secular reason; the rejection of innate ideas; the non-supernaturalist affirmation of certainty, objectivity, absolutes; the uplifted view of man and of the human potential; the value placed on intellectual self-development as a means to self-fulfillment and personal happiness on earth - the sum of it is Aristotelian, specifically Aristotelian, as against the mysticism of the Platonic tradition and the self-proclaimed bankruptcy of the skeptical tradition. If the key to the Enlightenment is secularism without skepticism, this means: the key is Aristotle.

In the deepest philosophic sense, it is Aristotle who laid the foundation of the United States of America. The nation of the Enlightenment is the nation of Aristotelianism.

Aristotle provided the foundation, but he did not know how to implement it politically. In the modern world - under the influence of the pervasive new spirit - a succession of thinkers developed a new conception of the nature of government. The most important of these men, the one with the greatest direct influence on America, was John Locke. The political philosophy Locke bequeathed to the Founding Fathers was the social implementation of the regnant Aristotelianism; it became the base of the new nation's distinctive institutions.

Throughout history, the state had been regarded, implicitly or explicitly, as the ruler of the individual - as a sovereign authority (with or without supernatural mandate), an authority logically antecedent to the citizen, and to which he must submit. The Founding Fathers challenged this primordial notion. They started with the premise of the primacy and sovereignty of the individual. The individual, they held, logically precedes the group or the institution of government. Whether or not any social organization exists, each man possesses certain individual rights. And "among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" - or, in the words of a New Hampshire state document, "among which are the enjoying and defending life and liberty; acquiring, possessing, and protecting property; and in a word, of seeking and obtaining happiness."

These rights were regarded not as a disparate collection, but as a unity, expressing a single fundamental right. Man's rights, declares Samuel Adams, often termed the father of the American Revolution, "are evident branches of, rather than deductions from, the duty of self-preservation, commonly called the first law of nature." Man's rights are natural, i.e., their warrant is the laws of reality, not any arbitrary human decision; and they are inalienable, i.e., absolutes not subject to renunciation, revocation or infringement by any person or group. Rights, affirms John Dickinson, "are not annexed to us by parchments and seals....They are born with us; exist with us; and cannot be taken from us by any human power without taking our lives. In short, they are founded on the immutable maxims of reason and justice."

And "to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed..." The powers of government are, therefore, limited, not merely de facto or by default, but on principle: government is forbidden to infringe man's rights. It is forbidden because, in Adams's words, "the grand end of civil government, from the very nature of its institution, is for the support, protection, and defence of those very rights..."

On this view, the state is the servant of the individual; it is not a sov-

ereign possessing primary authority, but an agent possessing only delegated authority pursuant to the voluntary decision of the citizens, charged by them with a specific practical function - and subject to dissolution and reconstruction if it trespasses outside its assigned purview. Far from being the ruler of man, the state - in the American conception - exists to prevent the division of men into rulers and ruled, i.e., to enable the individual, in Adams's words, "to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man, but only to have the law of nature for his rule."

(To be continued.)

OBJECTIVIST CALENDAR

The following starting dates have been scheduled for the tape lectures of Dr. Leonard Peikoff's courses. Introduction to Logic. Hartford, Conn., March 7 (contact Brian Bambrough, 203-429-1535); St. Louis, April 6 (Fulton Huxtable, 314-291-7130, eves. and wkends.). Modern Philosophy: Kant to the Present. Webster, N.Y., March 10 (John Krehling, 716-872-2287, eves.).

B.W.

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