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AMERICA'S PHILOSOPHIC ORIGIN

Part II

By Leonard Peikoff

"I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."

Jefferson - and the other Founding Fathers - meant it. They did not confine their efforts to the battle against theocracy and monarchy; they fought - on the same grounds, invoking the same principle of individual rights - against democracy, i.e., the system of unlimited majority rule. They recognized that the cause of freedom is not advanced by the multiplication of despots, and they did not propose to substitute the tyranny of a mob for that of a handful of autocrats.

We must bear in mind, says Jefferson, that the will of the majority "to be rightful, must be reasonable; that the minority possess their equal rights, which equal laws must protect, and to violate which would be oppression." In a pure democracy, writes Madison in a famous passage of The Federalist, "there is nothing to check the inducements to sacrifice the weaker party or an obnoxious individual. Hence it is that such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths."

When the framers of the American republic spoke of "the people," they did not mean a collectivist entity one part of which was authorized to consume the rest. They meant a sum of individuals, each of whom - whether strong or weak, rich or poor - retains his inviolate guarantee of individual rights. "It is agreed," says John Adams, "that 'the end of all government is the good and ease of the people, in a secure enjoyment of their rights, without oppression'; but it must be remembered, that the rich are people as well as the poor; that they have rights as well as others; that they have as clear and as sacred a right to their large property as others have to theirs which is smaller; that oppression to them is as possible and as wicked as to others."

The genius of the Founding Fathers was their ability not only to grasp the revolutionary political ideas of the period, but to devise a means of implementing those ideas in practice, i.e., of translating them from the realm of philosophic abstraction into that of socio-political reality. By defining in detail the division of powers within the government, and the ruling procedures, including the

brilliant mechanism of checks and balances, they established a system whose operation and integrity were independent, so far as possible, of the moral character or personal ambition of any of its temporary officials - a system impervious, so far as possible, to subversion by an aspiring statist or by the public mood of the moment.

The heroism of the Founding Fathers was that they recognized an unprecedented opportunity, the chance to create a country of individual liberty for the first time in history - and staked everything on their judgment: the new nation, and their own lives, fortunes, and sacred honor. If liberty requires the principled recognition and practical implementation of man's individual rights, then Lord Acton, the famous student of liberty, spoke the truth when he said: liberty "was that which was not, until the last quarter of the eighteenth century in Pennsylvania."

The American approach to politics, however, rested on the basic philosophy of the Enlightenment - above all, on its view of reason and its view of values, i.e., its epistemology and its ethics. And in regard to basic philosophy, the Americans of the revolutionary era were counting on Europe.

There was no American attempt to give systematic, comprehensive statement to the ideas of the Enlightenment mind, and little concern with the technical issues involved in their defense. The American thinkers functioned within an intellectual atmosphere largely taken for granted as incontestable, made of generalized emphases and tendencies absorbed from Europe - an atmosphere whose elements were invoked as and when necessary, in no particular order, in the course of countless letters, pamphlets, essays, etc. It was an era dominated by men of action, philosophically minded but eager to apply in political practice the abstract principles they had learned; men who assumed - insofar as they raised the question at all - that the ultimate validation and philosophic base of their principles had already been established beyond challenge by the thinkers of Europe.

The Americans were counting on what did not exist. There was no such base in Europe. In every fundamental area, the thought of the European Enlightenment was filled with unanswered questions, torn by contradictions - and eminently vulnerable to challenge.

In epistemology, the European champions of the intellect had been unable to formulate a tenable view of the nature of reason and, therefore, to validate their proclaimed confidence in its powers. As a result, from the beginning of the eighteenth century (and even earlier), the philosophy advocating reason was in the process of gradual, but accelerating, disintegration.

John Locke - widely regarded during the Enlightenment as Europe's leading philosopher, taken as the definitive spokesman for reason and the new science - is a representative case in point. The philosophy of this spokesman is a contradictory mixture, part Aristotelian, part Christian, part Cartesian, part skeptic - in short, an eclectic shambles all but openly inviting any Berkeley or Hume in the vicinity to rip it into shreds. The philosopher taken as the defender of nature, could not establish its reality; the philosopher taken as the defender of scientific law, could not validate the concept of causality, held that basic causes are outside man's power to grasp, and stated explicitly that a "science of bodies" (i.e., a science of material entities) is impossible; the philosopher taken as the champion of the senses, was promulgating every doctrine necessary to invalidate them; the philosopher taken as the spokesman for the unlimited, self-confident power of the human mind, was proclaiming (in effect) that the field open to human cognition is a precarious island surrounded by a sea of the uncertain, the subjective, the unintelligible, the unknowable.

When the men of the Enlightenment counted on Locke (and his equivalents) as their intellectual defender, they were counting on a philosophy of reason so profoundly undercut as to be in process of self-destructing.

The same destruction was occurring in Europe in the field of ethics. Although Locke and many others had held out the promise of a rational, demonstrative science of ethics, none of them delivered on this promise; none could produce or define such an ethics. Meanwhile, European voices, rising and growing louder, were declaring that the principles of ethics are ultimately based not on reason, but on feeling.

James Wilson, one of the most distinguished legal philosophers of the American Enlightenment, a man who signed both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, expresses this view clearly. Reflecting the influence of Hume (and others), Wilson declares: "The ultimate ends of human actions, can never, in any case, be accounted for by reason. They recommend themselves entirely to the sentiments and affections of men, without dependence on the intellectual faculties." Morality, he states, derives from man's "moral sense" or "instincts" or "conscience." As to the validation of this faculty's pronouncements, "I can only say, I feel that such is my duty. Here investigation must stop..." Jefferson, among others, held similar views. But, regardless of who formally agreed or disagreed with Wilson on this issue, the fact is that he spoke for all of them: no American did identify the basis of a rational, scientific ethics; all - admittedly or not - were relying for ethical guidance on what they felt to be moral.

And what did they feel? What they inherited from their mentors, i.e., the mixture they absorbed from the European Enlightenment: the mixture endorsing Aristotelian, egoist self-assertion - and Christian, self-denying "love"; with moral superiority awarded to the latter.

In America, the egoist element was more pronounced and went deeper than in Europe. It was embedded, implicitly, in the foundations of the country: it was presupposed by the new, individualist system, which stressed the right of each man to the preservation of his own life and the pursuit of his own happiness. But the Americans did not identify the ethical issue in such terms. The general tenor of their (unsystematic) ethical statements, the dominant sentiment voiced during the period, is captured in a few brief extracts from Jefferson.

The philosophers of the ancient world, he writes, were "really great" in defining "precepts related chiefly to ourselves...[but] in developing our duties to others, they were short and defective." They did not advocate "charity and love to our fellow men" or "benevolence [to] the whole family of mankind." It was Jesus who left man the principles of "the most perfect and sublime" ethics - the ethics of "universal philanthropy, not only to kindred and friends, to neighbors and countrymen, but to all mankind" - the ethics which recognizes that there is "implanted in our breasts a love of others, a sense of duty to them, a moral instinct, in short, which prompts us irresistibly to feel and to succor their distresses..."

The Americans were political revolutionaries, but not ethical revolutionaries. Whatever their partial (and largely implicit) acceptance of the principle of ethical egoism, they remained explicitly within the standard European tradition, avowing their primary allegiance to a moral code stressing utilitarian service and social duty. Such was the American conflict: an impassioned politics presupposing one kind of ethics, within a cultural atmosphere professing the sublimity of an opposite kind of ethics.

The signs of the conflict, and of the toll it exacted from the distinctively American political approach, were evident at the beginning - in Jefferson's proposal

for free public education; in Paine's advocacy of a variety of governmental welfare functions; in Franklin's view that an individual has no right to his "superfluous" property, which the public may dispose of as it chooses, "whenever the Welfare of the Publick shall demand such Disposition"; etc.

The American Enlightenment (like the European) came to an abrupt end. "Its ideas were soon repudiated or corrupted," writes Herbert Schneider, "its plans for the future were buried, and there followed on its heels a thorough and passionate reaction against its ideals and assumptions."

It was a reaction prepared for by the Enlightenment itself, by its own philosophical deficiencies, by the seeds it had nourished and allowed to sprout - the seeds of an irrationalism it was not equipped to combat and an altruism it predominantly endorsed. Philosophically, America was born a profound anomaly: a solid political structure, erected on a tottering base.

The Founding Fathers did not know that the era in which they lived and fought and planned, was on the threshold of yielding to its antipode. They did not know that they had snatched a country from the jaws of history at the last possible moment. They did not know that, even as they struggled to bring the new nation into existence, its philosophical gravediggers were already at work, cashing in on the period's contradictions: in the very decade in which the Founding Fathers were publishing their momentous documents, Kant was publishing his.

Symbolically, this is America's philosophical conflict, running through all the years of its subsequent history: the Declaration of Independence, with everything it presupposes, against the Critique of Pure Reason, with everything to which it leads.

POSTSCRIPT

I would like to call Dr. Peikoff's essay to the particular attention of two groups, both of whom believe that the solution of this country's problems requires not new philosophical thinking, but merely an uncritical return to the unsolved contradictions of the past. These groups are: 1. The conservatives, who believe that capitalism can stand on a base of mysticism and altruism. 2. The businessmen, who believe that philosophy has no practical influence - as taught by their philosophy, Pragmatism.

Ayn Rand

OBJECTIVIST CALENDAR

The following starting dates have been scheduled for the tape lectures of Dr. Leonard Peikoff's course, Introduction to Logic: Lake Oswego, Oreg., March 31 (contact Joyce Lee, 503-636-4268, eves.); Phoenix, April 3 (Dennis Wilson, 602-956-7678, eves.); Calgary, Alberta, Canada, April 8 (Al Kincius, 403-264-5254).

B.W.

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Contributing Editor: **Leonard Peikoff**; Subscription Director: **Elayne Kalberman**; Production Manager: **Barbara Weiss.**