

# THE Ayn Rand LETTER®

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## PHILOSOPHY: WHO NEEDS IT

(An address given to the graduating class of the United States Military Academy at West Point on March 6, 1974.)

Since I am a fiction writer, let us start with a short short story. Suppose that you are an astronaut whose spaceship gets out of control and crashes on an unknown planet. When you regain consciousness and find that you are not hurt badly, the first three questions in your mind would be: Where am I? How can I discover it? What should I do?

You see unfamiliar vegetation outside, and there is air to breathe; the sunlight seems paler than you remember it and colder. You turn to look at the sky, but stop. You are struck by a sudden feeling: if you don't look, you won't have to know that you are, perhaps, too far from the earth and no return is possible; so long as you don't know it, you are free to believe what you wish - and you experience a foggy, pleasant, but somehow guilty, kind of hope.

You turn to your instruments: they may be damaged, you don't know how seriously. But you stop, struck by a sudden fear: how can you trust these instruments? How can you be sure that they won't mislead you? How can you know whether they will work in a different world? You turn away from the instruments.

Now you begin to wonder why you have no desire to do anything. It seems so much safer just to wait for something to turn up somehow; it is better, you tell yourself, not to rock the spaceship. Far in the distance, you see some sort of living creatures approaching; you don't know whether they are human, but they walk on two feet. They, you decide, will tell you what to do.

You are never heard from again.

This is fantasy, you say? You would not act like that and no astronaut ever would? Perhaps not. But this is the way most men live their lives, here, on earth.

Most men spend their days struggling to evade three questions, the answers to which underlie man's every thought, feeling and action, whether he is consciously aware of it or not: Where am I? How do I know it? What should I do?

By the time they are old enough to understand these questions, men believe that they know the answers. Where am I? Say, in New York City. How do I know



it? It's self-evident. What should I do? Here, they are not too sure - but the usual answer is: whatever everybody does. The only trouble seems to be that they are not very active, not very confident, not very happy - and they experience, at times, a causeless fear and an undefined guilt, which they cannot explain or get rid of.

They have never discovered the fact that the trouble comes from the three unanswered questions - and that there is only one science that can answer them: philosophy.

Philosophy studies the fundamental nature of existence, of man, and of man's relationship to existence. As against the special sciences, which deal only with particular aspects, philosophy deals with those aspects of the universe which pertain to everything that exists. In the realm of cognition, the special sciences are the trees, but philosophy is the soil which makes the forest possible.

Philosophy would not tell you, for instance, whether you are in New York City or in Zanzibar (though it would give you the means to find out). But here is what it would tell you: Are you in a universe which is ruled by natural laws and, therefore, is stable, firm, absolute - and knowable? Or are you in an incomprehensible chaos, a realm of inexplicable miracles, an unpredictable, unknowable flux, which your mind is impotent to grasp? Are the things you see around you real - or are they only an illusion? Do they exist independent of any observer - or are they created by the observer? Are they the object or the subject of man's consciousness? Are they what they are - or can they be changed by a mere act of your consciousness, such as a wish?

The nature of your actions - and of your ambition - will be different, according to which set of answers you come to accept. These answers are the province of metaphysics - the study of existence as such or, in Aristotle's words, of "being qua being" - the basic branch of philosophy.

No matter what conclusions you reach, you will be confronted by the necessity to answer another, corollary question: How do I know it? Since man is not omniscient or infallible, you have to discover what you can claim as knowledge and how to prove the validity of your conclusions. Does man acquire knowledge by a process of reason - or by sudden revelation from a supernatural power? Is reason a faculty that identifies and integrates the material provided by man's senses - or is it fed by innate ideas, implanted in man's mind before he was born? Is reason competent to perceive reality - or does man possess some other cognitive faculty which is superior to reason? Can man achieve certainty - or is he doomed to perpetual doubt?

The extent of your self-confidence - and of your success - will be different, according to which set of answers you accept. These answers are the province of epistemology, the theory of knowledge, which studies man's means of cognition.

These two branches are the theoretical foundation of philosophy. The third branch - ethics - may be regarded as its technology. Ethics does not apply to everything that exists, only to man, but it applies to every aspect of man's life: his character, his actions, his values, his relationship to all of existence. Ethics, or morality, defines a code of values to guide man's choices and actions - the choices and actions that determine the course of his life.



Just as the astronaut in my story did not know what he should do, because he refused to know where he was and how to discover it, so you cannot know what you should do until you know the nature of the universe you deal with, the nature of your means of cognition - and your own nature. Before you come to ethics, you must answer the questions posed by metaphysics and epistemology: Is man a rational being, able to deal with reality - or is he a helplessly blind misfit, a chip buffeted by the universal flux? Are achievement and enjoyment possible to man on earth - or is he doomed to failure and disaster? Depending on the answers, you can proceed to consider the questions posed by ethics: What is good or evil for man - and why? Should man's primary concern be a quest for joy - or an escape from suffering? Should man hold self-fulfillment - or self-destruction - as the goal of his life? Should man pursue his values - or should he place the interests of others above his own? Should man seek happiness - or self-sacrifice?

I do not have to point out the different consequences of these two sets of answers. You can see them everywhere - within you and around you.

The answers given by ethics determine how man should treat other men, and this determines the fourth branch of philosophy: politics, which defines the principles of a proper social system. As an example of philosophy's function, political philosophy will not tell you how much rationed gas you should be given and on which day of the week - it will tell you whether the government has the right to impose any rationing on anything.

The fifth and last branch of philosophy is esthetics, the study of art, which is based on metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. Art deals with the needs - the refueling - of man's consciousness.

Now some of you might say, as many people do: "Aw, I never think in such abstract terms - I want to deal with concrete, particular, real-life problems - what do I need philosophy for?" My answer is: In order to be able to deal with concrete, particular, real-life problems - i.e., in order to be able to live on earth.

You might claim - as most people do - that you have never been influenced by philosophy. I will ask you to check that claim. Have you ever thought or said the following? "Don't be so sure - nobody can be certain of anything." You got that notion from David Hume (and many, many others), even though you might never have heard of him. Or: "This may be good in theory, but it doesn't work in practice." You got that from Plato. Or: "That was a rotten thing to do, but it's only human, nobody is perfect in this world." You got it from Augustine. Or: "It may be true for you, but it's not true for me." You got it from William James. Or: "I couldn't help it! Nobody can help anything he does." You got it from Hegel. Or: "I can't prove it, but I feel that it's true." You got it from Kant. Or: "It's logical, but logic has nothing to do with reality." You got it from Kant. Or: "It's evil, because it's selfish." You got it from Kant. Have you heard the modern activists say: "Act first, think afterward"? They got it from John Dewey.

Some people might answer: "Sure, I've said those things at different times, but I don't have to believe that stuff all of the time. It may have been true yesterday, but it's not true today." They got it from Hegel. They might say: "Consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." They got it from a very little mind, Emerson. They might say: "But can't one compromise and borrow different



ideas from different philosophies according to the expediency of the moment?" They got it from Richard Nixon - who got it from William James.

Now ask yourself: if you are not interested in abstract ideas, why do you (and all men) feel compelled to use them? The fact is that abstract ideas are conceptual integrations which subsume an incalculable number of concretes - and that without abstract ideas you would not be able to deal with concrete, particular, real-life problems. You would be in the position of a newborn infant, to whom every object is a unique, unprecedented phenomenon. The difference between his mental state and yours lies in the number of conceptual integrations your mind has performed.

You have no choice about the necessity to integrate your observations, your experiences, your knowledge into abstract ideas, i.e., into principles. Your only choice is whether these principles are true or false, whether they represent your conscious, rational convictions - or a grab-bag of notions snatched at random, whose sources, validity, context and consequences you do not know, notions which, more often than not, you would drop like a hot potato if you knew.

But the principles you accept (consciously or subconsciously) may clash with or contradict one another; they, too, have to be integrated. What integrates them? Philosophy. A philosophic system is an integrated view of existence. As a human being, you have no choice about the fact that you need a philosophy. Your only choice is whether you define your philosophy by a conscious, rational, disciplined process of thought and scrupulously logical deliberation - or let your subconscious accumulate a junk heap of unwarranted conclusions, false generalizations, undefined contradictions, undigested slogans, unidentified wishes, doubts and fears, thrown together by chance, but integrated by your subconscious into a kind of mongrel philosophy and fused into a single, solid weight: self-doubt, like a ball and chain in the place where your mind's wings should have grown.

You might say, as many people do, that it is not easy always to act on abstract principles. No, it is not easy. But how much harder is it, to have to act on them without knowing what they are?

Your subconscious is like a computer - more complex a computer than men can build - and its main function is the integration of your ideas. Who programs it? Your conscious mind. If you default, if you don't reach any firm convictions, your subconscious is programmed by chance - and you deliver yourself into the power of ideas you do not know you have accepted. But one way or the other, your computer gives you print-outs, daily and hourly, in the form of emotions - which are lightning-like estimates of the things around you, calculated according to your values. If you programmed your computer by conscious thinking, you know the nature of your values and emotions. If you didn't, you don't.

(To be continued.)

Ayn Rand