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PHILOSOPHICAL DETECTION

My last two Letters were devoted to a brief presentation of an enormous subject: "Philosophy: Who Needs It." I covered the essentials, but a more detailed discussion of certain points will be helpful to those who wish to study philosophy (particularly today, because philosophy has been abolished by the two currently fashionable schools, Linguistic Analysis and Existentialism).

I said that the best way to study philosophy is to approach it as one approaches a detective story. A detective seeks to discover the truth about a crime. A philosophical detective must seek to determine the truth or falsehood of an abstract system and thus discover whether he is dealing with a great achievement or an intellectual crime. A detective knows what to look for, or what clues to regard as significant. A philosophical detective must remember that all human knowledge has a hierarchical structure; he must learn to distinguish the fundamental from the derivative, and in judging a given philosopher's system, he must look - first and above all else - at its fundamentals. If the foundation does not hold, neither will anything else.

In philosophy, the fundamentals are metaphysics and epistemology. On the basis of a knowable universe and of a rational faculty's competence to grasp it, you can define man's proper ethics, politics and esthetics. (And if you make an error, you retain the means and the frame of reference necessary to correct it.) But what will you accomplish if you advocate honesty in ethics, while telling men that there is no such thing as truth, fact or reality? What will you do if you advocate political freedom on the grounds that you feel it is good, and find yourself confronting an ambitious thug who declares that he feels quite differently?

The layman's error, in regard to philosophy, is the tendency to accept consequences while ignoring their causes - to take the end result of a long sequence of thought as the given and to regard it as "self-evident" or as an irreducible primary, while negating its preconditions. Examples can be seen all around us, particularly in politics. There are liberals who want to preserve individual freedom while denying its source: individual rights. There are religious conservatives who claim to advocate capitalism while attacking its root: reason. There are sundry "libertarians" who plagiarize the Objectivist theory of politics, while rejecting the metaphysics, epistemology and ethics on which it rests. That attitude, of course, is not confined to philosophy: its simplest example is the people who scream that they need more gas and that the oil industry should be taxed out of existence.

As a philosophical detective, you must remember that nothing is self-evident except the material of sensory perception - and that an irreducible primary is a fact which cannot be analyzed (i.e., broken into components) or derived from antecedent facts. You must examine your own convictions and any idea or theory you study, by asking: Is this an irreducible primary - and, if not, what does it depend on? You

must ask the same question about any answer you obtain, until you do come to an irreducible primary: if a given idea contradicts a primary, the idea is false. This process will lead you to the field of metaphysics and epistemology - and you will discover in what way every aspect of man's knowledge depends on that field and stands or falls with it.

There is an old fable which I read in Russian (I do not know whether it exists in English). A pig comes upon an oak tree, devours the acorns strewn on the ground and, when his belly is full, starts digging the soil to undercut the oak tree's roots. A bird perched on a high branch upbraids him, saying: "If you could lift your snoot, you would discover that the acorns grow on this tree."

In order to avoid that pig's role in the forest of the intellect, one must know and protect the metaphysical-epistemological tree that produces the acorns of one's convictions, goals and desires. And, conversely, one must not gobble up any brightly colored fruit one finds, without bothering to discover that it comes from a deadly yew tree. If laymen did no more than learn to identify the nature of such fruit and stop munching it or passing it around, they would stop being the victims and the unwary transmission belts of philosophical poison. But a minimal grasp of philosophy is required in order to do it.

If an intelligent and honest layman were to translate his implicit, common-sense rationality (which he takes for granted) into explicit philosophical premises, he would hold that the world he perceives is real (existence exists), that things are what they are (the Law of Identity), that reason is the only means of gaining knowledge and logic is the method of using reason. Assuming this base, let me give you an example of what a philosophical detective would do with some of the catch phrases I cited in my preceding Letters.

"It may be true for you, but it's not true for me." What is the meaning of the concept "truth"? Truth is the recognition of reality. (This is known as the correspondence theory of truth.) The same thing cannot be true and untrue at the same time and in the same respect. That catch phrase, therefore, means: a. that the Law of Identity is invalid; b. that there is no objectively perceivable reality, only some indeterminate flux which is nothing in particular, i.e., that there is no reality (in which case, there can be no such thing as truth); or c. that the two debaters perceive two different universes (in which case, no debate is possible). (The purpose of the catch phrase is the destruction of objectivity.)

"Don't be so sure - nobody can be certain of anything." Bertrand Russell's gibberish to the contrary notwithstanding, that pronouncement includes itself; therefore, one cannot be sure that one cannot be sure of anything. The pronouncement means that no knowledge of any kind is possible to man, i.e., that man is not conscious. Furthermore, if one tried to accept that catch phrase, one would find that its second part contradicts its first: if nobody can be certain of anything, then everybody can be certain of everything he pleases - since it cannot be refuted, and he can claim he is not certain he is certain (which is the purpose of that notion).

"This may be good in theory, but it doesn't work in practice." What is a theory? It is a set of abstract principles purporting to be either a correct description of reality or a set of guidelines for man's actions. Correspondence to reality is the standard of value by which one estimates a theory. If a theory is inapplicable to reality, by what standard can it be estimated as "good"? If one were to accept that notion, it would mean: a. that the activity of man's mind is unrelated to reality; b. that the purpose of thinking is neither to acquire knowledge nor to guide man's actions. (The purpose of that catch phrase is to invalidate man's conceptual faculty.)

"It's logical, but logic has nothing to do with reality." Logic is the art or skill of non-contradictory identification. Logic has a single law, the Law of Identity, and its various corollaries. If logic has nothing to do with reality, it means that the Law of Identity is inapplicable to reality. If so, then: a. things are not what they are; b. things can be and not be at the same time, in the same respect, i.e., reality is made up of contradictions. If so, by what means did anyone discover it? By illogical means. (This last is for sure.) The purpose of that notion is crudely obvious. Its actual meaning is not: "Logic has nothing to do with reality," but: "I, the speaker, have nothing to do with logic (or with reality)." When people use that catch phrase, they mean either: "It's logical, but I don't choose to be logical" or: "It's logical, but people are not logical, they don't think - and I intend to pander to their irrationality."

This is a clue to the kind of error (or epistemological sloppiness) that permits the spread of such catch phrases. Most people use them in regard to some concrete, particular instance and are not aware of the fact that they are uttering a devastating metaphysical generalization. When they say: "It may be true for you, but it's not true for me," they usually mean some optional matter of taste, involving some minor value-judgment. The meaning they intend to convey is closer to: "You may like it, but I don't." The unchallenged idea that value-preferences and emotions are unaccountable primaries, is at the root of their statement. And, in defense of their failure of introspection, they are recklessly willing to wipe the universe out of existence.

When people hear the catch phrase: "It may have been true yesterday, but it's not true today," they usually think of man-made issues or customs, such as: "Men fought duels yesterday, but not today" or: "Women wore hoop skirts yesterday, but not today" or: "We're not in the horse-and-buggy age any longer." The proponents of that catch phrase are seldom innocent, and the examples they give are usually of the above kind. So their victims - who have never discovered the difference between the metaphysical and the man-made - find themselves, in helpless bewilderment, unable to refute such conclusions as: "Freedom was a value yesterday, but not today" or: "Work was a human necessity yesterday, but not today" or: "Reason was valid yesterday, but not today."

Now observe the method I used to analyze those catch phrases. You must attach clear, specific meanings to words, i.e., be able to identify their referents in reality. This is a precondition, without which neither critical judgment nor thinking of any kind is possible. All philosophical con games count on your using words as vague approximations. You must not take a catch phrase - or any abstract statement - as if it were approximate. Take it literally. Don't translate it, don't glamorize it, don't make the mistake of thinking, as many people do: "Oh, nobody could possibly mean this!" and then proceed to endow it with some whitewashed meaning of your own. Take it straight, for what it <u>does</u> say and mean.

Instead of dismissing the catch phrase, <u>accept</u> it - for a few brief moments. Tell yourself, in effect: "If I were to accept it as true, what would follow?" This is the best way of unmasking any philosophical fraud. The old saying of plain con men holds true for intellectual ones: "You can't cheat an honest man." Intellectual honesty consists in taking ideas seriously. To take ideas seriously means that you intend to live by, to <u>practice</u>, any idea you accept as true. Philosophy provides man with a comprehensive view of life. In order to evaluate it properly, ask yourself what a given theory, if accepted, would do to a human life, starting with your own.

Most people would be astonished by this method. They think that abstract thinking must be "impersonal" - which means that ideas must hold no personal meaning, value or importance to the thinker. This notion rests on the premise that a personal interest is an agent of distortion. But "personal" does not mean "non-objective"; it de-

pends on the kind of person you are. If your thinking is determined by your emotions, then you will not be able to judge anything, personally or impersonally. But if you are the kind of person who knows that reality is not your enemy, that truth and knowledge are of crucial, personal, selfish importance to you and to your own life - then, the more passionately personal the thinking, the clearer and truer.

Would you be willing and able to act, daily and consistently, on the belief that reality is an illusion? That the things you see around you, do not exist? That it makes no difference whether you drive your car down a road or over the edge of an abyss - whether you eat or starve - whether you save the life of a person you love or push him into a blazing fire? It is particularly important to apply this test to any moral theory. Would you be willing and able to act on the belief that altruism is a moral ideal? That you must sacrifice everything - everything you love, seek, own, or desire, including your life - for the benefit of any and every stranger?

Do not evade such issues by means of self-abasement - by saying: "Maybe reality is unreal, but I'm not wise enough to transcend my low-grade, materialistic bondage" or: "Yes, altruism is an ideal, but I'm not good enough to practice it." Self-abasement is not an answer - and it is not a license to apply to others the precepts from which you exempt yourself; it is merely a trap set by the very philosophers you are trying to judge. They have spent a prodigious effort to teach you to assume an unearned guilt. Once you assume it, you pronounce your mind incompetent to judge, you renounce morality, integrity and thought, and you condemn yourself to the gray fog of the approximate, the uncertain, the uninspiring, the flameless, through which most men drag their lives - which is the purpose of that trap.

The acceptance of unearned guilt is a major cause of philosophical passivity. There are other causes - and other kinds of guilt which are earned.

(To be continued.)

Ayn Rand

OBJECTIVIST CALENDAR

On Tuesday, April 30, Ayn Rand will appear on "Day at Night," an interview program on WNET-TV (Channel 13), at 11:30 P.M., in New York City. This program is syndicated in many other cities, on different dates; for information, contact your local public TV station.

The following starting dates have been scheduled for Dr. Leonard Peikoff's taped courses. Introduction to Logic. Eugene, Oreg., April 14 (contact Joyce H. Lee, 503-636-4268, eves.); Atlanta, May 6 (Dr. Bonar Newton, 404-351-9096). Founders of Western Philosophy: Thales to Hume. San Diego, April 17 (Anton Rosenlund, 714-297-1990 or 714-296-2277); San Antonio, April 20 (Dr. Lee Brooks, 512-684-7565, eves.).

B.W.

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