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PHILOSOPHICAL DETECTION

Part II

A major source of men's earned guilt in regard to philosophy - as well as in regard to their own minds and lives - is failure of introspection. Specifically, it is the failure to identify the nature and causes of their emotions.

An emotion as such tells you nothing about reality, beyond the fact that something makes you feel something. Without a ruthlessly honest commitment to introspection - to the conceptual identification of your inner states - you will not discover what you feel, what arouses the feeling, and whether your feeling is an appropriate response to the facts of reality, or a mistaken response, or a vicious illusion produced by years of self-deception. The men who scorn or dread introspection take their inner states for granted, as an irreducible and irresistible primary, and let their emotions determine their actions. This means that they choose to act without knowing the context (reality), the causes (motives), and the consequences (goals) of their actions.

The field of extrospection is based on two cardinal questions: "What do I know?" and "How do I know it?" In the field of introspection, the two guiding questions are: "What do I feel?" and "Why do I feel it?"

Most men can give themselves only some primitively superficial answers - and they spend their lives struggling with incomprehensible inner conflicts, alternately repressing their emotions and indulging in emotional fits, regretting it, losing control again, rebelling against the mystery of their inner chaos, trying to unravel it, giving up, deciding to feel nothing - and feeling the growing pressure of fear, guilt, self-doubt, which makes the answers progressively harder to find.

Since an emotion is experienced as an immediate primary, but is, in fact, a complex, derivative sum, it permits men to practice one of the ugliest of psychological phenomena: rationalization. Rationalization is a cover-up, a process of providing one's emotions with a false identity, of giving them spurious explanations and justifications - in order to hide one's motives, not just from others, but primarily from oneself. The price of rationalizing is the hampering, the distortion and, ultimately, the destruction of one's

cognitive faculty. Rationalization is a process not of perceiving reality, but of attempting to make reality fit one's emotions.

Philosophical catch phrases are handy means of rationalization. They are quoted, repeated and perpetuated in order to justify feelings which men are unwilling to admit.

"Nobody can be certain of anything" is a rationalization for a feeling of envy and hatred toward those who are certain. "It may be true for you, but it's not true for me" is a rationalization for one's inability and unwillingness to prove the validity of one's contentions. "Nobody is perfect in this world" is a rationalization for the desire to continue indulging in one's imperfections, i.e., the desire to escape morality. "Nobody can help anything he does" is a rationalization for the escape from moral responsibility. "It may have been true yesterday, but it's not true today" is a rationalization for the desire to get away with contradictions. "Logic has nothing to do with reality" is a crude rationalization for a desire to subordinate reality to one's whims.

"I can't prove it, but I feel that it's true" is more than a rationalization: it is a description of the process of rationalizing. Men do not accept a catch phrase by a process of thought, they seize upon a catch phrase - any catch phrase - because it fits their emotions. Such men do not judge the truth of a statement by its correspondence to reality - they judge reality by its correspondence to their feelings.

If, in the course of philosophical detection, you find yourself, at times, stopped by the indignantly bewildered question: "How could anyone arrive at such nonsense?" - you will begin to understand it when you discover that evil philosophies are systems of rationalization.

The nonsense is never accidental, if you observe what subjects it deals with. The elaborate structures in which it is presented are never purposeless. You may find a grim proof of reality's power in the fact that the most virulently rabid irrationalist senses the derivative nature of emotions and will not proclaim their primacy, their sovereign causelessness, but will seek to justify them as responses to reality - and if reality contradicts them, he will invent another reality of which they are the humble reflectors, not the rulers.

In modern history, the philosophy of Kant is a systematic rationalization of every major psychological vice. The metaphysical inferiority of this world (as a "phenomenal" world of mere "appearances"), is a rationalization for the hatred of reality. The notion that reason is unable to perceive reality and deals only with "appearances," is a rationalization for the hatred of reason; it is also a rationalization for a profound kind of epistemological egalitarianism which reduces reason to equality with the futile pattering of "idealistic" dreamers. The metaphysical superiority of the "noumenal" world, is a rationalization for the supremacy of emotions, which are thus given the power to know the unknowable by ineffable means.

The complaint that man can perceive things only through his own consciousness, not through any other kinds of consciousnesses, is a rationalization for the most profound type of second-handedness ever confessed in print: it is the whine of a man tortured by perpetual concern with what others think and by inability to decide which others he should conform to. The wish to perceive

"things in themselves" unprocessed by any consciousness, is a rationalization for the wish to escape the effort and responsibility of cognition - by means of the automatic omniscience a whim-worshiper ascribes to his emotions. The moral imperative of the duty to sacrifice oneself to duty, a sacrifice without beneficiaries, is a gross rationalization for the image (and soul) of an austere, ascetic monk who winks at you with an obscenely sadistic pleasure - the pleasure of breaking man's spirit, ambition, success, self-esteem, and enjoyment of life on earth. Et cetera. These are just some of the highlights.

Observe that the history of philosophy reproduces - in slow motion, on a macrocosmic screen - the workings of ideas in an individual man's mind. A man who has accepted false premises is free to reject them, but until and unless he does, they do not lie still in his mind, they grow without his conscious participation and reach their ultimate logical conclusions. A similar process takes place in a culture: if the false premises of an influential philosopher are not challenged, generations of his followers - acting as the culture's subconscious - milk them down to their ultimate consequences.

Since Kant substituted the collective for the objective (in the form of "categories" collectively creating a "phenomenal" world), the next step was the philosophy of Hegel - which is a rationalization for subjectivism, for the power-lust of an ambitious elite who would create a "noumenal," non-material world (by means of establishing the brute force of an absolute state in the "phenomenal," material one). Since those outside the elite could not be counted upon to obey or accept such a future, the next side step was Pragmatism - which is a rationalization for the concrete-bound, range-of-the-moment, anti-conceptual mentalities that long for liberation from principles and future.

Today, there is the philosophy of Linguistic Analysis - which is a rationalization for men who are able to focus on single words, but unable to integrate them into sentences, paragraphs or philosophical systems, yet who wish to be philosophers. And there is the philosophy of Existentialism - which discards the politeness of rationalization, takes Kant straight, and proclaims the supremacy of emotions in an unknowable, incomprehensible, inexplicable, nauseating non-world.

Observe that, in spite of their differences, altruism is the untouched, unchallenged common denominator in the ethics of all these philosophies. It is the single richest source of rationalizations. A morality that cannot be practiced is an unlimited cover for any practice. Altruism is the rationalization for the mass slaughter in Soviet Russia - for the legalized looting in the welfare state - for the power-lust of politicians seeking to serve the "common good" - for the concept of a "common good" - for envy, hatred, malice, brutality - for the arson, robbery, highjacking, kidnapping, murder perpetrated by the selfless advocates of sundry collectivist causes - for sacrifice and more sacrifice and an infinity of sacrificial victims. When a theory achieves nothing but the opposite of its alleged goals, yet its advocates remain undeterred, you may be certain that it is not a conviction or an "ideal," but a rationalization.

Philosophical rationalizations are not always easy to detect. Some of them are so complex that an innocent man may be taken in and paralyzed by intellectual confusion. At their first encounter with modern philosophy, many people make the mistake of dropping it and running, with the thought: "I know

it's false, but I can't prove it. I know something's wrong there, but I can't waste my time and effort trying to untangle it." Here is the danger of such a policy: you might forget all about Kant's "categories" and his "noumenal" world, but some day, under the pressure of facing some painfully difficult choice, when you feel tempted to evade the responsibility or to make a dishonest decision, when you need all of your inner strength, confidence and courage, you will find yourself thinking: "How do I know what's true? Nobody knows it. Nobody can be certain of anything." This is all Kant wanted of you.

A thinker like Kant does not want you to agree with him: all he wants is that you give him the benefit of the doubt. He knows that your own subconscious does the rest. What he dreads is your conscious mind: once you understand the meaning of his theories, they lose their power to threaten you, like a Halloween mask in bright sunlight.

One further suggestion: if you undertake the task of philosophical detection, drop the dangerous little catch phrase which advises you to keep an "open mind." This is a very ambiguous term - as demonstrated by a man who once accused a famous politician of having "a wide open mind." That term is an anti-concept: it is usually taken to mean an objective, unbiased approach to ideas, but it is used as a call for perpetual skepticism, for holding no firm convictions and granting plausibility to anything. A "closed mind" is usually taken to mean the attitude of a man impervious to ideas, arguments, facts and logic, who clings stubbornly to some mixture of unwarranted assumptions, fashionable catch phrases, tribal prejudices - and emotions. But this is not a "closed" mind, it is a passive one. It is a mind that has dispensed with (or never acquired) the practice of thinking or judging, and feels threatened by any request to consider anything.

What objectivity and the study of philosophy require is not an "open mind," but an active mind - a mind able and eagerly willing to examine ideas, but to examine them critically. An active mind does not grant equal status to truth and falsehood; it does not remain floating forever in a stagnant vacuum of neutrality and uncertainty; by assuming the responsibility of judgment, it reaches firm convictions and holds to them. Since it is able to prove its convictions, an active mind achieves an unassailable certainty in confrontations with assailants - a certainty untainted by spots of blind faith, approximation, evasion and fear.

If you keep an active mind, you will discover (assuming that you started with common-sense rationality) that every challenge you examine will strengthen your convictions, that the conscious, reasoned rejection of false theories will help you to clarify and amplify the true ones, that your ideological enemies will make you invulnerable by providing countless demonstrations of their own impotence.

No, you will not have to keep your mind eternally open to the task of examining every new variant of the same old falsehoods. You will discover that they are variants of attacks on certain philosophical essentials - and that the entire, gigantic battle of philosophy (and of human history) revolves around the upholding or the destruction of these essentials. You will learn to recognize at a glance a given theory's stand on these essentials, and to reject the attacks without lengthy consideration - because you will know (and will be able to prove) in what way any given attack, old or new, is made of contradictions

and "stolen concepts."

I will list these essentials for your future reference. But do not attempt the shortcut of accepting them on faith (or as semi-grasped approximations and floating abstractions). That would be a fundamental contradiction and it would not work.

The essentials are: in metaphysics, the Law of Identity - in epistemology, the supremacy of reason - in ethics, rational egoism - in politics, individual rights (i.e., capitalism) - in esthetics, metaphysical values.

If you reach the day when these essentials become your absolutes, you will have entered Atlantis - at least, psychologically; which is a precondition of the possibility ever to enter it existentially.

Ayn Rand

A REPORT

Many readers have written to us asking about the response to Ayn Rand's lecture at West Point. They are interested, they said, because they regard West Point as an institution representing the original premises of this country.

Miss Rand's lecture, sponsored by the English Department, had been intended for the graduating class (about 400), as part of the senior-year philosophy course. With military punctuality, the audience assembled - 1200 people, including row after row of gray-uniformed cadets, a great many faculty members (all of whom are military officers), and some civilians; when Miss Rand reached the podium, they greeted her with a standing ovation. Throughout the talk, attentive silence alternated with bursts of laughter or applause, at appropriate points. At the end, after her solemn tribute to the Army of the United States, as Miss Rand raised her hand in a military salute, the audience rose in a body, offering a longer, more tumultuous ovation.

After a brief question period, during which Miss Rand's answers on political and philosophical subjects evoked stormy cheers, a reception was held in another building. The place was jammed with cadets struggling to break a path to Miss Rand, bombarding her with questions. A distinguished colonel, a senior faculty member, told me: "Usually these receptions consist of a handful of people seated in a corner. I've never seen anything like this."

As we were leaving, I overheard an exchange between Miss Rand and the head of the Point's philosophy program. "Did I sell the cadets on philosophy to your satisfaction?" she asked. "You did more," he said. "You satisfied

me qua philosophy teacher, qua colonel, and qua man."

Since our return to New York, we have received reports of unusual philosophic ferment among the cadets, including heated discussions in class and out. We have received a request for 100 copies of the Letters containing the lecture, to be distributed to students and teachers who wish to study it.

The most eloquent evidence of the response is the following: West Point has asked (and received) permission to reprint "Philosophy: Who Needs It" in a new philosophy textbook which the English Department is publishing for this fall's classes. The editors are placing Ayn Rand's lecture at the beginning of the book - to serve as our future officers' introduction to the subject of philosophy.

Leonard Peikoff

OBJECTIVIST CALENDAR

The following starting dates were scheduled for the taped lectures of Dr. Leonard Peikoff's course, Introduction to Logic: Denver, May 23 (contact Robert Gifford, 303-751-8052); Montreal, June 13 (Christian David Sweeny, 514-484-8094).

B.W.