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"IDEAS V. GOODS"

In the 1930s, Isabel Paterson (author of The God of the Machine) used to say to me: "If you hear some bad collectivistic notions, chances are that they came from liberals. But if you hear or read something outrageously, god-awfully collectivistic, you may be sure that the author is a conservative."

In this respect, things have not changed much since the 1930s, except that the pronouncements of both sides have become cruder and more obvious. The liberals are riding the puddles left by the spent tide of the collectivist philosophy. The conservatives, who share all their basic premises, are trying to dispense with philosophy. Some liberals go as far as one can go, though most of them still mumble something about individual rights. But most conservatives drop such old-fashioned concerns and manage to gallop ahead of the enemy toward the enemy's goal.

In my Letters on "Censorship: Local and Express" (August 13-September 10, 1973), I discussed the fact that Chief Justice Burger, a conservative, used government controls of business (e.g., antitrust) as precedent and justification for imposing censorship on the expression of ideas (allegedly only in the field of pornography); the liberal Justices dissented, properly, in the name of individual rights, but did not (and could not) answer Burger in regard to the violation of the rights of businessmen. I wrote: "When Chief Justice Burger declares to the liberals that they cannot explain why rights 'should be severely restrained in the marketplace of goods and money, but not in the marketplace of pornography,' I am tempted to feel that it serves them right - except that all of us are the victims. If this censorship ruling is not revoked, the next step will be more explicit: it will replace the words 'marketplace of pornography' with the words 'marketplace of ideas.'"

We did not have long to wait. Under the title "Ideas v. Goods," a story in Time magazine (January 14, 1974) shows how and by whom the road for that next step is being paved.

According to the story, Professor Ronald H. Coase of the University of Chicago, a British economist, is advocating government control of the press. "He suggests that federal regulation of the press would be appropriate on social and economic principle. In a scholarly paper given before a recent New York City seminar, Coase...challeng[ed] the special status of the American press and assault[ed] the philosophical validity of its chief protector, the First Amendment."

The hallmark of the unphilosophical mind is its indiscriminate mixture of floating abstractions and momentary concretes, without the ability (or the need) to tie the first to reality, and the second to principles. "Neither in his paper nor in informal remarks did Coase specify what kind of regulation he had in mind. Rather, he talked of a 'real law that would actually regulate what people say.' He believes that the 'market for ideas,' to which journalism belongs, is economically motivated, like the market for goods, and therefore as fit for public regulation as railroads or drug companies. 'I do not believe that this distinction between the market for goods and the market for ideas is valid,' he declared."

This much is true: that distinction is not valid. It is a product of the mystics' mind-body dichotomy, which holds that ideas belong to some higher, "spiritual" dimension of reality, while goods belong to an inferior, material dimension: this earth. But, in reality, there is only one reality; man is an integrated entity of mind and body, and neither can survive without the other. Man's mind (his ideas) is as crucially necessary to the production of goods as the translation into a material form (into speech or print) is to the development of ideas. (See Atlas Shrugged.) This is not, however, the way Mr. Coase sees it.

Observe the curious justification he offers for advocating control of the press. If Time reports it correctly, his justification is the fact that the market for ideas is "economically motivated." This means that an economic motivation as such is unworthy, reprehensible or evil, that it deserves no respect and those who act on it deserve no freedom. Since an "economic motivation" is a desire to be paid for one's work, i.e., a desire to earn a living (on any scale, great or modest), this means that Mr. Coase denies a man's right to support his own life and regards a man's work as the property of others (of "society"), to be disposed of as they see fit. This means that Mr. Coase regards man's survival (and everything it requires) as a contemptible activity of this vulgar, material earth, an activity to which man is not entitled and which must be curbed, restricted, controlled by the government.

Mr. Coase goes beyond the liberals' usual double standard, which differentiates a desire for profits from a desire for wages, even though both do represent an economic motivation. He cashes in on this particular dichotomy, as the intellectually appropriate nemesis of those who attack the profit-makers, but champion the wage-earners. He damns them all. And he damns all forms of trade, i.e., all free markets, whether of goods or of ideas.

"Coase challenged two assumptions that, he says, have created the distinction in public policy: 1) that consumers are able to distinguish good ideas from bad on their own, though they need help in choosing among competing goods; and 2) that publishers and broadcasters deserve laissez-faire treatment while other entrepreneurs do not. He sees journalists as salesmen of products. Hence there is no reason to believe that 'producers who are found to be so unscrupulous in their behavior in other markets can be trusted to act in the public interest whether they publish or work for the New York Times, the Chicago Tribune or CBS.'"

This is an excellent example of what happens to the thought processes of an unphilosophical mind. Care to count, as an exercise in philosophical detection, how many assumptions this sort of challenger has left unchallenged?

1. That consumers are the ultimate idol of any society, the "final causation" of all its efforts. 2. That the needs of the consumers constitute "the public interest" and are the standard by which one judges the value of all human activity. 3. That service to the consumers is the only moral justification and proper motivation of a man's life. 4. That all rights inhere in the consumers, while the producers have none. 5. That "laissez-faire treatment" is a privilege which has to be "deserved." 6. That the non-commercial, the unearned, the unpaid-for, the given-or-thrown-away, might have some merit, but to classify men as "salesmen" is to brand them as malefactors. 7. That producers of material goods have been proved to be so unscrupulous that they cannot be trusted in any field. 8. That material success requires unscrupulousness, that dishonesty is practical, that competition in a free market is won by the purveyors of shoddy goods and services, and that there is no such thing as an honest product honestly sold. 9. That the omnipotent consumers are congenitally incapable of distinguishing the good from the bad, either among material goods or among ideas. 10. That it is unnecessary to explain who would be qualified, and by what criterion, to protect the consumers from their freedom of choice, for their own good - i.e., which people would be empowered to regulate which other people's speech. It is necessary only to demand "a real law."

Care to integrate all these assumptions - and many, many others - into one concept? It is a concept which Mr. Coase, on the evidence, would be incapable of challenging: altruism.

Now observe the motivation (and the triviality) of an unphilosophical mind. Observe the depth at which it stops, i.e., what issues it regards as fundamental enough to justify so awesome a proposal as the erection of the ultimate capstone of a totalitarian dictatorship: government control of speech and press. "Coase seems to find little virtue in any form of journalism ('It deals with sensation and scandal, things that can be made entertaining or amusing'). He depicts the press collectively as a self-serving purveyor of misinformation. While journalists presume a high moral standard for others, they are willing to publish material drawn from 'stolen' documents....Coase finds it paradoxical that, historically, liberal journalists and intellectuals have urged further Government control in other fields while they use the First Amendment to deny such interference in the ideas markets. His explanation: the press trades profitably in the ideas market but cloaks its purpose in 'a mantle of virtue.'"

This means that to "trade profitably" is a shameful purpose which has to be hidden under some "mantle of virtue" - virtue having nothing to do with profit or trade. (Do you remember who said that if you seek to benefit by it, your action has no moral import? Do you recognize Kant's influence?) This means that to offer people a value, whether goods or ideas, for which they are willing to pay, is a vice - but to force the unwanted down their throats and minds at the point of a gun, is a virtue.

Wouldn't you suppose that notions of this kind are (or should be) propagated by a confirmed totalitarian statist or, at the least, by some liberal of the New Left variety? "Coase, 63, is no admirer of Orwellian Big Brothers. A British subject who has taught in the U.S. since 1951, he favors Barry Goldwater among politicians and has a low opinion of Government's ability to regulate anything properly. Ideally, he is against any public intervention in private enterprise. But that caveat is irrelevant to his thesis."

This is what happens to men - to all those "practical," cynical, hard-headed realists - who discard ideals and philosophy.

When one discards ideals, the fact that a given policy (such as government controls) is evil, does not constitute a reason for rejecting it. On the contrary, such an estimate serves as an incentive to adopt and expand that policy: to a cynic's mind, that which is evil, is potent and practical.

When one discards philosophy, one accepts the world "as it is" - as it is made by other people - and one does not challenge the fundamental premises of current beliefs: one loses the capacity to perceive fundamentals. The fact that a given policy (such as government controls) has been proved, over and over again, to be a devastating failure, does not constitute a reason for abolishing it: an unphilosophical mind has no means to conceive of an alternative. Taking the man-made as the metaphysical, such a mind merely struggles to seize "a slice of the pie" by devising some controls of its own.

Transposed to another field, this sort of mind and policy would produce the figure of a doctor who snaps resentfully that to look for the cause of an epidemic would take too long, and advises - in the name of justice - that the disease be spread to other cities. For years, the conservatives did not object to the outrageous injustice of antitrust legislation imposed on businessmen; instead, they have been advocating the extension of antitrust to labor unions. The proposal to combat today's ills (which are the result of government controls) by giving the government the power to control the press, is a shocking but logical development of that policy.

If principles are not the motivation of the conservatives' policy, what is? The Time story offers a clue. The state of today's press is not good; it is not, however, as bad as Mr. Coase alleges. But even if it were, consider the degree of blinding hatred a man would have to feel against the press in order to be eager to chain it at the price of giving up the freedom of the mind (his own included), without being able to see that those he hates, whoever they are, would be the first commissars of the censorship bureau.

Better than any other example, the Time story captures and conveys the smell of the conservatives' style: the stale odor of rancorous anti-intellectuality, concrete-bound stubbornness, shifting murk, evasion, appeasement, compromise - and, ultimately, nothing but a festering hostility.

Apparently disturbed by Mr. Coase's proposal, Time attempts to answer him, but does not do much better. Nowhere in its alleged refutation does it mention the words "the right to freedom of speech," nor even the word "rights." It relies exclusively on empirical observations, tradition, and the public good - e.g., "...the Coase theory ignores more than 200 years of American experience ..." and "Despite its lapses and excesses, an unfettered press provides a unique check on powerful institutions that need constant scrutiny." And: "If direct competition among newspapers has declined, the public still has a choice of ideamongers: the surviving papers, a variety of magazines, an assortment of network and independent broadcasters. Further, there is a small but healthy trend among newsmen toward self-examination and criticism. None of these factors promise perfection. But the Coase theory, if ever put into practice, is a prescription for impotence." This sounds like a Freudian slip. Whose impotence? The individual's? The people's? Or the press's?

If this is the best defense that can be offered for the freedom of the press - if hostility and power-lust are the motivating forces of the two adversaries on such an issue - any aspiring censor can feel safe in the knowledge that he will have no serious opposition to contend with.

Do not wonder why capitalism is losing ground or what powerful enemy is destroying it - or why one can expect nothing but betrayal from those alleged anti-statists who propose to save it without the help of philosophy.

Ayn Rand

OBJECTIVIST CALENDAR

We have been asked to announce that Allan Blumenthal will offer a twelve-lecture course on MUSIC: theory, history and performance.

The course deals with the nature of music - its structure, forms, components, and technical vocabulary - its development, rise and fall, from ancient Greece to the present - its meaning in human life. The lectures offer the student an overview of the problems and achievements of a great art, and a fuller understanding of his own response to music. The course will be illustrated throughout by live and recorded demonstrations.

The lectures will be given every week, on Tuesday, at 7:30 P.M., from September 17 to December 17, 1974 (excluding October 22 and November 19), at the Statler Hilton Hotel, 7th Avenue at 33rd Street, New York City. Tuition is \$75.00. Brochures, including registration forms, will be sent shortly to The Ayn Rand Letter subscribers in the New York Metropolitan area. For further information, write to Dr. Allan Blumenthal at P.O. Box 381, Forest Hills, N.Y. 11375.

In other cities, tapes of the lectures will be made available, on a rental basis, to groups of ten persons or more. Inquiries should be addressed to Barbara Weiss, P.O. Box 95, Murray Hill Station, New York, N.Y. 10016.

The following starting dates have been scheduled for Dr. Leonard Peikoff's taped courses. Introduction to Logic. Cavalier, N.D., July 11 (contact John Page, 701-265-4254, 10-11 P.M.). Modern Philosophy: Kant to the Present. St. Louis, August 18 (Fulton Huxtable, 314-291-7130, evenings, or 314-862-2420, days).

B.W.

