

# THE Ayn Rand LETTER®

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## MORAL INFLATION

"Inflation" is defined in the dictionary as "undue expansion or increase of the currency of a country, esp. by the issuing of paper money not redeemable in specie." (Random House Dictionary.) It is interesting to note that the word "inflated" is defined as "distended with air or gas; swollen."

This last is not a coincidence: in regard to social issues, "inflation" does not mean growth, enlargement or expansion, it means an "undue" - or improper or fraudulent - expansion. The expansion of a country's currency (which, incidentally, cannot be perpetrated by private citizens, only by the government) consists in palming off, as values, a stream of paper backed by nothing but promises (or hot air) and getting actual values, the citizens' goods or services, in return - until the country's wealth is drained. A similar activity, in private performance, is the passing of checks on a non-existent bank account. But, in private performance, this is regarded as a crime - and most people understand why such an activity cannot last for long.

Today, people are beginning to understand that the government's account is overdrawn, that a piece of paper is not the equivalent of a gold coin, or an automobile, or a loaf of bread - and that if you attempt to falsify monetary values, you do not achieve abundance, you merely debase the currency and go bankrupt.

The same is true of all values, material or spiritual. If a country's professed moral values are false, it may survive and stumble on for a while (not too happily) so long as and to the extent that those values are ignored in practice. But if you attempt to put such values into wide circulation, if you infuse them into a country's practical politics and saturate its culture, you set in motion a process of moral inflation: the more a country pursues those values, the greater its moral lethargy; the more you accelerate the printing presses of the spirit, the worse the drain on the country's moral energy; you do not achieve a reign of virtue, you merely debase morality and drive the public into a state of bitterly cynical despair.

But this type of inflation is more complex and harder for people to understand than the economic one, particularly since the first is the basic cause of the second. It is in the name of altruism - of self-sacrificial help to others - that the ravages of government spending have been perpetrated, in every country that tried such policies; without the belief that self-immolation is their moral duty, the victims would not have stood for it. Today, we are witnessing the burst of the balloon of altruism, which was being inflated for centuries, yet our public leaders keep cursing the sins of ambition, ability and selfishness as the cause of our plight, and demanding more sacrifices as the cure.

Of late, the liberals have begun to join the conservatives in voicing an anxious concern about the moral deterioration of this country. Both groups have their



own scapegoats, usually political, whom they blame for "setting a bad example," for "permissiveness," etc. But politicians do not - and cannot - determine the moral character of a country: the government is the product, not the cause, of a nation's moral standards. If these standards are false, the government cashes in on them and accelerates the country's destruction. A country's moral tone is set by its intellectuals. This is true even in dictatorships, if their docile hacks can be called intellectual: observe the importance a dictatorship attaches to ideological propaganda, which perpetuates the evil notions that brought it to power.

The average man lacks the time, the interest and, in most cases, the independence to formulate a moral philosophy of his own. He picks his moral guidance, as best he can, from the cultural atmosphere of his time - as a rule, subconsciously. When there is a profound rift between the people and the intellectuals - as there is in this country - the average man can neither follow the leaders nor hold out indefinitely: he gives up.

What moral guidance is he offered today? The price which modern intellectuals are paying for their anti-conceptual, range-of-the-moment, pragmatist (or existentialist) notions is their moral impotence, their inability to grasp the meaning of their own actions. If any of them are sincere in their concern about this country's moral twilight - and I believe that some of them are - they have no capacity to see that they are its cause, that they are blaming their victim, the people, for their own default, and that whenever one of them tries to appeal to morality, he is merely contributing to the country's demoralization.

For example, consider the liberals' indignant assertions that the American people are cynical or morally corrupt because they are indifferent to the Watergate scandals. Under any code of morality, a double standard is regarded as a vicious injustice. It is hard to defend Mr. Nixon, but it is impossible to applaud the prosecution of lesser malfeasances when much greater ones have been committed with impunity by the political party now conducting the prosecution, and have been covered up by the silence of the very clique now accusing the people of being morally indifferent. How long will an average man preserve his moral stature under a daily barrage of accusations of that kind, before he concludes that immorality consists, not in evil-doing, but in getting caught?

What is he offered on the other side? There was a conservative group that advocated "Fairness to the President" in some rather well-reasoned newspaper ads. But if he joined it, he would find himself squirming with embarrassment when he saw, on television, the result and climax of that campaign: a bunch of neat-looking, young hippies with homemade placards, praying for Mr. Nixon on the steps of the Capitol. How long will that average man preserve the conviction that fairness is practical?

If the religionist wing of conservatism is futile, the secular one is, perhaps, worse. The religionists preach the morality of altruism, knowing that the liberals and the extreme left are its much more consistent practitioners, but hoping - since consistency is a requirement of reason, not of faith - that a miracle will wipe out that fact. The secular conservatives solve the contradiction by discarding morality altogether, by surrendering it to the enemy and declaring that social-political-economic problems are amoral.

A small example of this viewpoint, on the popular level, is offered by a conservative columnist of The New York Times. Let me preface it by saying that I have no opinion on the subject of "no-fault insurance," because I do not know the legal issues involved in automobile accidents. But the moral implications of that slogan, which make me feel uneasy, are precisely the ones that the Times columnist acclaims. In a piece entitled "The No-Fault Society" (February 4, 1974), he extols the possibilities of what his title indicates; his manner is humorous, but he is only half-kidding. "What might happen if we were to apply the no-fault principle to other matters in our



lives?" he asks, and cites, as an example, the energy crisis, which he describes as "a national orgy of oily recrimination" among various political groups. "In a no-fault society, all this irrelevant fault finding would give way to factfinding and solution finding: oilmen, politicians and consumers of energy would stop fishing for carp and start providing incentives for new supplies and reductions of demand."

How does one engage in "fact-finding" if, in fact, a disaster occurs through someone's fault? Would the "solution finding" consist in placing the burden of the disaster's consequences equally on the guilty and the innocent? How would one bring the guilty party to correct his fault? In the name of what? If the energy crisis was caused by the government's regulations (or, for that matter, by the oilmen's "greed," or by the consumers' "overindulgence," or by the Arab sheiks' international blackmail), what would no-faultfinding consist in? Apparently, in saying: "Please, boys, change your policy. We know that you mean well and that your motives are pure, but your policy is impractical." If they answer: "We're getting away with it," you say: "You'll suffer in the long run." They answer: "In the long run, we'll all be dead." You say: "But you're ruining us!" They answer: "So what?" What are you going to say at this point? "It's unfair"? That would be a moral judgment.

The worst fault of these amoralists - who regard moral concerns as naive - is their abysmal naiveté: they seem to believe that practicality, and the knowledge of what is practical, and long-range vision (i.e., a rational grasp of reality, respect for facts, devotion to truth) have nothing to do with morality and do not represent the rarest of virtues; that these characteristics are innate, instinctual and dominant in all people, that nobody seeks evil goals, and that human atrocities are merely the products of errors. Since it is not likely that anyone could hold such a belief past the age of five, one must ask oneself what unimaginable fear of moral judgment could prompt men to maintain an illusion of that kind.

The column offers an indication: "But there are dangers, of course [in "a no-fault way of life"]: without blame, there is no shame, and without an abiding sense of guilt, no purifying conscience to become our guide." An inspiring notion, isn't it? If, on hearing that the purpose of morality is to induce shame and guilt, an average young man declares: "Then to hell with morality!" - could you blame him? That column would not be worth discussing if it were not for the fact that it presents, in crudely explicit terms, a theory preached by many prominent conservative economists.

If that average young man withstands such theories and resists the temptation to drop out of school (he is constantly told that a diploma would bring him a better job), another Times essay might get him. Written by a different author and entitled "Keeping Cool in Alaska" (December 28, 1973), this one discusses the Alaskan aborigines' resistance to the civilizing influence of outsiders, to "acculturation." "They have, of course, paid dearly [for their resistance], in a low standard of living, a frighteningly high infant-mortality rate, inferior health care and a high rate of illiteracy. But theirs is a freedom that white men might well envy. I began to understand it back in 1965, as a reporter in southeastern Alaska, when a man representing a pulp-mill spoke to the local chamber of commerce on what was wrong with the Indians." The man explained that the area had a lot of unemployed Indians, that they all signed on and proved to be excellent workers. "'But in two or three months, when those Indians had a little more money than they needed, they quit - went off to hunt and fish!' he said, still struck by the incredibility of it all. 'And then, three or four months later when they were broke, they came back and wanted to work for us again! Now, what we've got to teach these people is that they have to work an eight-hour day, a five-day week and a 50-week year.' I wondered then just who had the right philosophy, the pulp-mill man or the Indians? Today I believe that the Indians are wiser."

If the average young man then chucks the discipline of schooling, picks up a



guitar and goes off to search for wisdom - and for food in garbage cans along the way - would one blame him? If he is a little brighter than average, he might realize that it's no use struggling for success in business, because he would be expected to provide jobs for the unemployed anywhere on earth and to keep that pulpmill running, somehow, until those superior beings felt like coming back to work.

He might even remember reading that when Charles E. Wilson said: "What's good for the country is good for General Motors and vice versa" (which, in a free-market economy, would be true), a howl of indignation about "selfishness" went up from the commentators. But nobody protested when one of the "little people," a working woman, was recently asked by a reporter whether she had lost confidence in all politicians, and answered as follows: "Not really, because I try to find out what a politician stands for. If he has been supported by big business in his campaigns and his votes favor that view, that's a tip-off. I do research to find out whether a politician is likely to put me first." (Daily News, May 30, 1974; emphasis added.)

If, stumbling down a dark, frozen road, that young man sees the lights of a city skyline in the foggy distance and, for a brief moment, feels a desperate stab of love and pride for his country, a UPI dispatch (December 20, 1973) would cut it off. "The Senate adopted a resolution today calling for observance of a National Day of Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer on April 30. The resolution was introduced by Sen. Mark O. Hatfield, R. Ore., and adopted by voice vote and with no debate or opposition. The resolution says that because of the nation's failings, it 'behooves us to humble ourselves before Almighty God, to confess our national sins and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.'...In a Senate speech, Hatfield said: 'We witness a country torn apart with division and lacking the spiritual foundation which would restore its vision and purpose. We, as a people, through our own acquiescence to corruption and waste, have helped to create a moral abyss that produces a disdain for honesty and humility in high levels of national leadership.'"

This, I submit, is the bottom of the abyss.

(To be continued.)

Ayn Rand

#### OBJECTIVIST CALENDAR

The following starting dates have been scheduled for Dr. Leonard Peikoff's taped courses. Modern Philosophy: Kant to the Present. Fairfield Heights, N.S.W., Australia, August 2 (contact R.E. Barros, 604-1333, days). Introduction to Logic. West Lafayette, Ind., September 14 (Richard Matula, 317-463-3646, eves.). Founders of Western Philosophy: Thales to Hume. Calgary, Alberta, Canada, September 16 (Al Kincius, 403-264-5254).

B.W.