THE Ayn Rand LETTER®

Vol. III, No. 16 May 6, 1974

Philosophy, today, is a dead science, like one of those dead towns that can still be found in the West: a single street, leading nowhere, with gusts of wind and sand whistling through the empty eye sockets of broken windows, flapping the shreds of an awning against a crumbling doorway, battering the rotted, paintless walls, erasing the last of the letters that had once been signs announcing a general store or a saloon, the signs of human activity, life and hope - and, in the distance, the black hole of an abandoned gold mine.

Like that dead town, philosophy, in its present state, has only a historical interest to offer - a record of what men had thought once, since they do not engage in that activity any longer. The vast majority of philosophy's present representatives are only random derelicts who seek refuge in those abandoned ruins on a rainy night and then drift on, leaving nothing behind but an occasional empty beer can.

For most people today, the cardinal problem is confusion: they are unable to understand one another, or their cultural leaders, or their government's policies, or the direction in which this country is moving - or what is the matter with the whole world and how it got that way. Life is becoming too complex and too precarious, they cry, to worry about philosophical theories, which are of no practical consequence and have no power to affect human existence.

Those who want to recapture a glimmer of understanding, should read the following excerpt from Dr. Leonard Peikoff's forthcoming book, The Ominous Parallels, to be published by Weybright and Talley, Inc. (We have omitted the footnote references for quoted material; these will appear in the book.) This excerpt is a theoretical presentation of the philosophy of pragmatism; it reads like a journalistic report on the mental state of today's leaders - like a frightening dissection, diagnosis and explanation of current newspaper headlines.

Do you hear it said that men don't think? Read what their thinkers have taught them. Do you hear it said that ideas are impotent? See whether you recognize the ideas that hang like a gray smog over today's cultural wastelands. Do you hear it said that men cannot be consistent? Observe with what rigid consistency they have carried out the commandments of the philosophy they absorbed. Do you hear it said that nobody wants to die for an ideal? Observe that those who say it are dying for the most vicious of notions.

In my Letter of January 14, 1974, I wrote: "The men who are not interested in philosophy need it most urgently: they are most helplessly in its power." Such men should realize that their lives are not in the power of living malefactors any longer, but in the power of ghosts - the ghosts that wail in the wind of the abandoned town they killed.

Ayn Rand

PRAGMATISM VERSUS AMERICA

By Leonard Peikoff

The original American system of government - capitalism - continued to function through most of the nineteenth century. No matter how hampered and, progressively, contradicted, the system was sustained by the remnants of the Enlightenment heritage still embedded in the American mind. Those remnants could not, however, hold out indefinitely: the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which gave birth to the United States, had never had a proper foundation or defense, and was profoundly undercut by the unremitting attacks of the nineteenth-century intellectuals. By the end of the century, the American system was hanging by a thread - which was promptly cut. A new philosophy swept the intellectuals and then the country.

This philosophy was pragmatism, its leading exponents were William James and John Dewey, and its message to a nation on the threshold of abandoning the fundamental principles of the Founding Fathers, was: There are no principles.

Pragmatism represents a continuation of the central ideas of Kant and Hegel - with an added twist of its own. Pragmatism is German metaphysical idealism, given an activist development.

Kant and Hegel had launched a massive attack on the concept of external, independent reality. Such a reality, said Kant, is unknowable; no, said Hegel, it is non-existent. The nature of thought, both concluded, must be radically reconceived: it is not the function of thought to grasp the facts of a universe which exists independent of mind.

Pragmatism agrees. The mind, Dewey insists, is not a "spectator"; knowledge - any kind of knowledge, whether in science or in ethics - is not "a disclosure of reality, of reality prior to and independent of knowing..."; it is not "a revelation of antecedent existences or Being." "The business of thought," he says, "is not to conform to or reproduce the characters already possessed by objects..."

The business of thought, Kant had said, is to construct, out of the data it receives, a universe of its own making - the physical (phenomenal) world. The business of thought (the Absolute thought), Hegel had said, is to produce a universe out of itself, by its own operations. The essence of mind, both concluded, is not to be a perceiver of reality, but to be the creator of reality. This is the heart of German idealism - and this is the heart of the pragmatist metaphysics.

Men, the pragmatists allow, do receive some kind of data on which their thought operates. These data, however - which the pragmatists call "experience" - do not represent a firm, "antecedent" reality to be identified by man, but an unformed, amorphous material to be shaped, molded, changed by man. The function of thought is not to "spectate," but - to use Dewey's term - actively to "reconstruct" this material, i.e., to impose a specific character on it, and thereby to bring a definite reality into existence.

Reality, the pragmatists state, is not "fixed and complete in itself"; it

is not "ready-made"; in itself, it is "unfinished," "plastic," "in the making," "malleable," "problematic," "indeterminate." Hegel, therefore, is wrong on this point: apart from thought, according to pragmatism, there is some sort of realm. Kant, however, is wrong also: this realm is not definite but unknowable - it is not anything specific. In itself, reality is a spread of something - without identity; something - which is nothing in particular.

The spread, on this view, is not infinitely malleable. Sometimes, the pragmatists observe, the data man receives prove intractable, and man fails in his attempted "reconstruction" of reality. Why this should be - how it is possible for nothing-in-particular to be recalcitrant - pragmatism does not say. (Any explanation would have to refer to the "antecedent" nature of reality, a concept which pragmatism rejects.) When success or failure in reshaping reality will occur, no one - according to pragmatism - can know in advance. In each situation, all one can do is try and see. Thought is "experimental," the pragmatists state - and the essence of the experiment is the attempt to discover whether, in any particular case, the malleable material will or will not yield to man's demands.

Kant and Hegel, each in his own way, had imposed certain limitations on the operation of the mind, holding that, although mind is the creator of reality, the mind nevertheless has its own inner nature and fixed principles of functioning, which it has to obey. Pragmatism disagrees. Dispensing with all "rigidity," all principles, all necessary laws, whether of reality or of the mind, the pragmatists proclaim the final climax of the idealist view: human beings, they hold, are free to select their own thought processes and patterns, in accordance with their own unrestricted choice; they are free to "experiment" with any form or method of thought which they can imagine or concoct - and, therefore, they are free to attempt to create whatever reality they choose, no holds barred.

Is there anything to function as a guide to men in their selection of a pattern of thought? Yes, answers pragmatism, the guide is: the demands of action. Human thought, on this view, is nothing but a practical "tool," an "instrument" to facilitate human action, and its content is to be judged, not by reference to reality (or to any laws of its own), but by the criterion applicable to any tool: Does it satisfy the purposes for which it was created? Does it "work"?

In the normal course of affairs, the pragmatists elaborate, men do not - and need not - think; they merely act - by habit, by routine, by unthinking impulse. But, in certain situations, the malleable material of reality suddenly asserts itself, and habit proves inadequate: men are unable to achieve their goals, their action is blocked by obstacles, and they begin to experience frustration, tension, trouble, doubt, "dis-ease." This, according to pragmatism, is when men should resort to the "instrument" of thought. And the goal of the thought is to "reconstruct" the situation so as to escape the trouble, alleviate the tension, remove the obstacles, and resume the normal process of unimpeded (and unthinking) action.

Toward this end, the mind formulates an "idea" - which is, according to Dewey, simply a "plan to act in a certain way as the way to arrive at the clearing up of a specific situation." If the plan, when acted on, removes the frustration; if the reshaping of reality succeeds; if, in Dewey's words, "existences, following upon the action rearrange or readjust themselves in the way the idea intends" - then the idea is true, pragmatically true; if not, then the idea is (pragmatically) false. The ruling epistemological standard, therefore, is consequences in action. "[An idea's] active, dynamic function is the all-important

thing about it," writes Dewey, "and in the quality of activity induced by it lies all its truth and falsity."

Since consequences in action determine truth (and since the success of man's "experiments" to reshape reality cannot be predicted), the truth of an idea, according to pragmatism, cannot be known in advance of action. The pragmatist does not expect to know, prior to taking an action, whether or not his "plan" will "work." He accepts, in Dewey's words, "the fundamental idea that we know only after we have acted and in consequences of the outcome of action."

Aristotle (and the Enlightenment shaped by his philosophy) had held that reality exists prior to and independent of human thought - and that human thought precedes human action; man, he held, must first grasp the appropriate facts and laws of reality; on this basis, he can then set the goals and determine the course of his action. Pragmatism represents a total reversal of this progression. For the pragmatist, the order is: man acts; he invents forms of thought to satisfy the needs of his action; reality adapts itself accordingly (except when, inexplicably, it resists). First, action - second, thought - third, reality.

On such a view, there is nothing (in thought or reality) to impose any fixed pattern on the course of human action. Men's actions, according to pragmatism, are subject to perpetual change, in every respect, as and when men so decide - and, therefore, so is thought, so is truth, so is reality. Men not only make reality, on this view; they make it and then, when the demands of their action change in character, they remake it according to a new pattern, until, suddenly blocked and "dis-eased," they discard that pattern and "experiment" with a new model, and so on without end.

In the whirling Heraclitean flux which is the pragmatist's universe, there are no absolutes. There are no facts, no fixed laws of logic, no certainty, no objectivity.

There are no facts - only provisional "hypotheses" which, for the moment, facilitate human action. There are no fixed laws of logic - only subjective, mutable, pragmatic "conventions," without any basis in reality. (Aristotle's logic, Dewey remarks, worked so well for earlier cultures that it is now overdue for a replacement.) There is no certainty - the very quest for it, says Dewey, is a fundamental aberration, a "perversion." There is no objectivity - the object is created by the thought and action of the subject. The only question for a pragmatist in this latter regard is: what form of subjectivism to adopt? If reality is created by men - by <u>which</u> men? If truth is that which works satisfactorily in fulfilling the demands of action - <u>whose</u> action? <u>whose</u> satisfaction? works - for <u>whom</u>?

William James - characteristically, although not consistently - adopts the personal version of subjectivism. Human actions and purposes, he observes, vary from individual to individual - and, therefore, so does truth. To be true, states James, "means for that individual to work satisfactorily for him; and the working and the satisfaction, since they vary from case to case, admit of no universal description." "...the 'same' predication," writes the pragmatist F.C.S. Schiller, "may be 'true' for me and 'false' for you if our purposes are different."

John Dewey, typifying the dominant wing within the movement, rejects this Jamesian approach; his <u>social</u> version of pragmatist subjectivism represents a more faithful adherence to the ideas of Hegel (whose avowed disciple Dewey had

been in the early years of his career). There is, according to Dewey, no such thing as an autonomous individual: human intelligence, he holds, is fundamentally conditioned by the collective thinking of society; the mind is not a "private" phenomenon, it is a social phenomenon. On this view, the pragmatist "reconstructor" of reality is not the individual, but society. Pragmatic truth, accordingly, is that which works - for the group; truth, like thought, is "public"; truth is those hypotheses which facilitate the actions and purposes of the community at large. In Dewey's philosophy, the concept of "public service" is fundamental not merely to ethics: it becomes the ruling standard in epistemology and metaphysics. (Following the practice of Kant and Hegel, Dewey denies that he is a subjectivist; equating the "objective" with the "collective," he insists that his social subjectivism is a defense of objectivity.)

As to ethics: on what, according to pragmatism, are man's value-judgments to be based?

On subjective feeling, answers James, on arbitrary desire or demand, whatever its content. "Any desire," he writes in one of his earlier essays, "is imperative to the extent of its amount; it makes itself valid by the fact that it exists at all." Hence, "the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand. The demand may be for anything under the sun."

Not so, declares Dewey. Before men act on a desire, he says, they must first evaluate the means required to implement it, and the consequences that will (probably) flow from acting on it. What standard is to guide this evaluation? There are no absolutes, answers Dewey; in each particular situation, in each bout of ethical "dis-ease," men are to evaluate the particular desire at issue, by reference to whatever values they do not choose to question at the time - although any one of these values may be questioned and discarded in the next situation. The test of a desire is its compatibility not with reality, but with the rest of men's desires of the moment. The operative standard, therefore, is feeling. In this way, despite his disclaimers, Dewey's ethical position reduces to that of James. (Dewey regards his version of the pragmatist ethics as the method of being "intelligent," "scientific" and "objective" in regard to value-judgments.)

When pragmatists claim action as the philosophic primary, the deeper meaning of their claim is: feeling is the primary, the metaphysical bulwark on which the pragmatist universe is built, the irreducible, all-controlling factor, which determines action, and thus thought, and thus reality. At the core of the pragmatist universe is emotion - raw, unreasoned, blind; or, in the traditional, romanticist terminology, "will."

Qua idealist, pragmatism is an outgrowth of Kant and Hegel; qua activist, it is an outgrowth of the nineteenth-century romanticist tradition, fully accepting that tradition's subjectivism, its anti-intellectualism, its blatant, voluntarist irrationalism. The typical romanticist, however, dismissed reason openly, in favor of feelings. Pragmatism goes one step further: it urges the same dismissal, and calls it a new view of reason.

By itself, as a distinctive theory, the pragmatist ethics is contentless: it urges men to pursue "practicality," but refrains from specifying any "rigid" set of values that could serve to define the concept. As a result, pragmatists - despite their repudiation of all systems and codes of morality - are compelled, if they are to implement their ethical approach at all, to accept and apply in

some (usually eclectic) form the value codes formulated by other, non-pragmatist moralists.

The dominant, virtually the only, moral code advocated by modern intellectuals in Europe and in America, is some variant of altruism. This, accordingly, is what the American pragmatists (especially those of the "social" school) routinely accept and preach. Typically, they do not crusade for it (there are no absolutes), or even adhere to it systematically (there is no system); they merely take it for granted as unquestionable, whenever they feel like it - which, given their Kantian-Hegelian schooling, is 90% (or more) of the time.

At one point in his earlier years, however, William James went so far as to elevate the altruist approach into a formal principle: "Since everything which is demanded is by that fact a good," he writes, "must not the guiding principle for ethical philosophy (since all demands conjointly cannot be satisfied in this poor world) be simply to satisfy at all times as many demands as we can [i.e., as many arbitrary demands of as many people as we can]?" This, despite its "rigidity," is the best formulation of the content of American pragmatist ethics, insofar as the latter is capable of fixed formulation. In practice, American pragmatism emerges as a version of Utilitarianism, though without the traditional Utilitarians' commitment to happiness as the absolute value-standard. It is a Utilitarianism whose motto is not: "the greatest happiness of the greatest number," but: "the greatest whims of the greatest number."

(To be continued.)

OBJECTIVIST CALENDAR

The title of Ayn Rand's talk at The Ford Hall Forum in Boston, on October 20, will be: "Egalitarianism and Inflation."

Starting on October 13, the taped lectures of Dr. Leonard Peikoff's course, Modern Philosophy: Kant to the Present, will be given in the San Antonio-Austin area. For further information, contact Dr. Lee Brooks, (512) 684-7565 (eves.).

We have been asked to announce that on Friday, October 11, Joan Mitchell Blumenthal will give a lecture at Hunter College, under the auspices of Hunter College Students of Objectivism. Title: "How Paintings Work." Time: 7:30 P.M. Place: Hunter High School Auditorium, Lexington Ave. between 68th and 69th Sts., New York City. For further information, call Robin Stark, (914) 969-2027 (eves.).

B.W.

The Ayn Rand Letter, published fortnightly by The Ayn Rand Letter, Inc., 183 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016.

Contributing Editor: **Leonard Peikoff**; Subscription Director: **Elayne Kalberman**; Production Manager: **Barbara Weiss.**