

# THE Ayn Rand LETTER®

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## PRAGMATISM VERSUS AMERICA

### Part II

By Leonard Peikoff

The two points central to the pragmatist ethics are: a formal rejection of all fixed standards - and an unquestioning absorption of the prevailing standards. The same two points constitute the pragmatist approach to politics, which, developed most influentially by Dewey, became the philosophy of the Progressive movement in this country (and of most of its liberal descendants down to the present day).

On the one hand, pragmatism presents itself, politically, as opposed to "rigidity," to "dogma," to "extremes" of any kind, whether capitalist or socialist; it avows that it is relativist, "moderate," "flexible," "experimental." The function of political thought, like that of all thought - says Dewey - is not to formulate general principles for the guidance of human action, but to deal pragmatically with particular social frustrations in a particular situation at a particular time, as and when such occasions arise. Pragmatism, he says, rejects "all social system-making and programs of fixed ends"; it holds that "Wholesale creeds and all-inclusive ideals are impotent in the face of actual situations..." There is, he says, "no antecedent universal proposition" to enable men to decide whether "the functions of a state should be limited or should be expanded." In each concrete case, these functions are to be "experimentally determined."

As in ethics, however, so in politics: the pragmatist is compelled, in practice, to employ some kind of standard to evaluate the results of his social "experiments" - a standard which, given his own self-imposed default, he necessarily absorbs from other, non-pragmatist trend-setters. Dewey virtually admits it, when he declares that "the genuine work of the intellectual class at any period" is not to originate standards or ideals, but "to detect and make articulate the nascent movements of their time" - which means: to take over and propagate whatever standards and ideals have already been launched by earlier intellectuals.

The "nascent movement" when Dewey wrote, the political principle imported from Germany and proliferating in all directions, was: collectivism.

The Enlightenment, states Dewey, is wrong. The traditional liberals (these include Locke and the Founding Fathers) are wrong in their "rigid doctrine of natural rights inherent in individuals independent of social organization." They are



wrong in their "conception of natural law as supreme over positive [i.e., state-made] law..." They are wrong in championing "the primacy of the individual over the state..." They are wrong in holding that the individual possessed antecedent "liberties of thought and action...which it was the sole business of the state to safeguard." They are wrong in believing that an expanding government is "the great enemy of individual liberty..." All these ideas, Dewey remarks, were "relevant" once, but none are "immutable truths good at all times and places" - and today, he claims, these "negative" ideas are outdated. Today, we must abandon the Enlightenment's "peculiar idea of personal liberty": "atomistic individualism," laissez-faire capitalism, the concern with private profit and "pecuniary aims," the "regime of individual initiative and enterprise conducted for private gain" - all of it, now, must be discarded.

We must get away from the distinctively American system, says Dewey, because, at root, we must "get away from the inherent conception of the individual as an isolated and independent unit." "The idea of a natural individual in his isolation possessed of full-fledged wants, of energies to be expended according to his own volition, and of a ready-made faculty of foresight and prudent calculation is as much a fiction in psychology as the doctrine of the individual in possession of antecedent political rights is one in politics."

Intelligence, says Dewey, is not "an individual possession"; it is "a social asset and is clothed with a function as public as is its origin..." Hence, "property and reward" are not "intrinsically individual"; since the minds of scientists and industrialists are a collectively created social resource, so is the wealth these minds have made possible. What America needs now, Dewey concludes, is "organized action in behalf of the social interest," "organized planning" of the economy - in short, "some kind of socialism."

He does not, says Dewey, wish to be "dogmatic" in regard to details, but there is, he suggests in several places, a useful model for Americans to emulate. He does not accept the philosophy or tactics of the authors of this model, he is a liberal and a democrat, Dewey insists, but, he states, it is nevertheless true that if Americans were to undertake to implement the pragmatist vision of a planned society, it "would signify that we had entered constructively and voluntarily upon the road which Soviet Russia is traveling with so much attendant destruction and coercion."

He advocates "real liberty" for man, says Dewey, and true opportunity for personal development. He does not reject individualism, he says - only the concepts of an independent individual and of individual rights. (He calls this theory a "new individualism.")

The process of spreading a philosophy by means of free discussion among thinking adults, is long and complex. From Plato to the present, it has been the dream of certain philosophers and social planners to circumvent this process, and, instead, to inject a controversial ideology directly into the plastic, unformed minds of children - by means of seizing a country's educational system and turning it into a vehicle for indoctrination. In this way, one may capture an entire generation, and thus, shortly, a country, without intellectual resistance, in a single coup d'école.

Rarely, if ever, has a free nation capitulated to this kind of demand as rapidly, as extensively, as abjectly, as America did. When the country surrendered its educational institutions - in countless forms, direct and indirect,



public and private, from nursery school on up - to the legion of Progressive educators spawned, above all, by Dewey, it formally delivered its youth into the hands of the philosophy of pragmatism, to be "reconstructed" according to the pragmatist image of man. It was a development which, in a few decades, created a new intellectual establishment in America: it was the inauguration, in the country of the Enlightenment, of the formal reign of Kant and Hegel, not merely among a handful of intellectuals, but among the leaders of American life in every field.

The goal of the Progressive indoctrinators was not, however, to impose a specific system of ideas on the student, but to destroy his capacity to hold any firm ideas, on any subject.

The theory of Progressive education begins with an all-out assault on the traditional, reality-oriented, intellect-oriented approach to education. For the pragmatist, education is not a process in which knowledge of "antecedent" reality, already accumulated and logically organized by men, is transmitted to the minds of their young. The function of education, writes Dewey, is not to communicate "a ready-made universe of knowledge"; a school is not primarily a place to learn "intellectual lessons"; the "staple of the curriculum" is not to be academic subject matter, not "facts, laws, information," not "various bodies of external fact labeled geography, arithmetic, grammar, etc." The traditional approach was satisfactory, says Dewey, given the traditional assumptions, which are now outdated: "mind was supposed to get its filling by direct contact with the world..." - and men supposed that primary importance was to be ascribed to "the intellectual aspect of our natures..."

According to the Progressives, education is to be not subject-centered, but child-centered. ("We don't teach history, we teach Johnny.") Education is to be "relevant," relevant to the "real interests" of the child - above all, to his interest in "self-expression." His "self," in this context, is his "instincts" and his "spontaneous impulses"; their natural "expression" is: action.

For pragmatism, the child (like the man he fathers) is not primarily a thinking being, but an acting being. He does not learn primarily by "listening" or by reading - he "learns by doing." Since he has not been taught "ready-made" knowledge, his classroom "doings" are to be "experimental." Like the pragmatist man, he learns to resort to thought as a "practical instrument" to enable him to escape the obstacles of the moment, whenever these, inexplicably, occur - and then drops the "instrument" when things are "working" again, as determined by his feelings. Since action is inherently concrete, the child's "doings" are centered around disconnected "projects," which cut across all the lines of traditional academic subjects, but dip briefly - without systematic order or principled organization - into whichever subjects the teacher (or the class) feels are "relevant" to the project of the moment.

Such random bits of information as the child does manage to absorb by this method are not, the Progressives insist, to be presented or accepted as certainties. Above all, the teacher (and the pupils) must not be "authoritarian," but "tentative" and "flexible."

Except on one point. Since group demands, according to Dewey, have metaphysical primacy, the function of the school is not to develop a reality-spirit, or an intellectual spirit, but a "social spirit." Since "mind cannot be regarded as an individual, monopolistic possession," the function of the school is to be a trustbuster: to recondition any aspiring "monopolist" of this kind, i.e., any



intellectually independent student, by training him, in Dewey's words, "to share in the social consciousness," i.e., to submit his mind to the demands of the group. The fundamental goal of education, writes Dewey, "is the development of a spirit of social co-operation and community life..."; the goal is to foster the child's "social capacity" - by, among other things, "saturating him with the spirit of service..."

Despite their relativism, the Progressives do feature one absolute, one certainty, one iron thread on which the child's various "doings" and "projects" are strung: society, and the imperative of conforming to it. "Life-adjustment," for this movement, means "community-adjustment." The school is to be centered on the child - and the child is to be centered on the collective. This is the "new individualism" translated into the field of education.

And this is still another reason why the child should not concentrate on facts and truths in his years at school: "The mere absorbing of facts and truths," writes Dewey, "is so exclusively individual an affair that it tends very naturally to pass into selfishness. There is no obvious social motive for the acquirement of mere learning, there is no clear social gain in success thereat." In the Progressive school, the child learns something transcending facts, truths and selfishness; the modern Johnny may not be able to read - or add, or spell, or think - but he does learn to serve, to serve others, to adapt to others, to obey their spokesmen. He does not absorb "a ready-made universe of knowledge"; instead, he absorbs a "ready-made," pragmatist contempt for knowledge (and for reason), combined with a "ready-made," "practical" philosophy: altruism, collectivism, statism.

For the most part, the American intellectuals who accepted the philosophy of pragmatism were under few illusions in regard to its meaning or consequences. This was not true, however, of the general public - businessmen included. The American public were led to embrace the pragmatist philosophy not because of its actual, theoretical content (of which they were, and remain, largely ignorant), but because of the method by which that content was presented to them: in its terminology and promises, pragmatism is a philosophy calculated to appeal specifically to an American audience.

The method, perfected especially by the Deweyites, consists in describing the philosophy in reverse: the pragmatists adopt the traditional language of science and philosophy, they flaunt the long-established, value-laden words which name the ideas deeply admired by most Americans - and they do it while discarding, and even inverting, the meaning of such language. Thus they pose as champions of the very ideas which their own philosophy systematically attacks and repudiates.

The American public, descendants of the era of Enlightenment, wanted a philosophy of this world; dismissing supernaturalism and religion, the Deweyites stress "nature" - and then construe the term as meaning a flux without identity, to be molded by the desires of the group. The Americans wanted a philosophy based on reason; the Deweyites stress "scientific method" and "intelligence" - then, in the name of these, propound a skeptic-voluntarist irrationalism which denies the mind's capacity to grasp reality, abstract principles, or fixed, causal laws. The Americans wanted a philosophy based on facts; the pragmatists stress "experience" - and deny that it yields information about facts. The Americans had little sympathy for self-indulgent wallowing in emotion; the Deweyites denounce "subjectivism" and "sentimentalism" - while raising feelings to a position of philosophic primacy. The Americans admired human self-confidence; the pragmatists stress



man's "power" - not his power to know, but to create, reality.

The Americans wanted a morality relevant to life; so do they, say the pragmatists - and disseminate a nihilistic amorality. The Americans admired individualism; so do they, say the Deweyites - a "new" kind of individualism, which teaches social conformity as the fundamental imperative. The Americans, unbound by age-long traditions, scornful of passive ancestor-worship, were open to new ideas; in every branch of philosophy, the pragmatists stress "experiment," "novelty," "progress" - and offer a rehash of traditional theories culminating in the oldest politics of all: statism. The Americans were unable to stomach the overt mysticism of the post-Kantian Germanic axis in philosophy; the pragmatists present themselves as the exponents of a distinctively "American" philosophic approach - which consists in enshrining the basic premises of such Germanism, while rejecting every fundamental idea, from metaphysics to politics, on which this country was founded. Above all, the Americans wanted ideas to be good for something on earth, to have tangible, practical significance; and, above all, the pragmatists stress "practicality" - which, according to their teachings, consists in action divorced from thought and reality.

The pragmatists stress the "cash value" of ideas. But the Americans did not know the "cash value" of the pragmatist ideas they were buying. They did not know that pragmatism could not deliver on its promise of this-worldly success because, at root, it is a philosophy which does not believe in this - or any - world.

When the Americans flocked to pragmatism, they believed that they were joining a battle to advance their essential view of reality and of life. They did not know that they were being marched in the opposite direction, that the battle had been calculated for a diametrically opposite purpose - or that the enemy they were being pushed to destroy was: themselves.

#### POSTSCRIPT

The theory of pragmatism, and its practical consequences - which we have to live with and fight against, today - may help you to concretize two issues:

1. The power of philosophy. Even though the American public accepted pragmatism with good intentions and under false pretenses, it is not their good intentions and incoherent hopes that unwary people helped to spread and to put into practice, but the literal meaning of the vicious theories they had never taken seriously nor cared fully to grasp.

2. The importance of a clear, rigidly precise understanding of the philosophical ideas you profess to accept. A superficial glance, a smattering, an approximation, a reliance on a pleasant feeling are disastrous in this realm. You would not sign a contract to buy an automobile on such a basis or written in such terms. A contract to buy philosophical convictions requires much more stringent language: the forfeit is your life.

If you want a current example, consider the following. The biggest mystery of Watergate is not what Richard Nixon did, but what he thought. No enemy could have destroyed him as thoroughly as he destroyed himself: consistently, systematically, he undercut his own case with every successive public statement he made



and every step he took, until there was nothing left of him or to him. Yet he was known as a "smart" politician, a clever manipulator, not a man of thought, but of action. Moral issues apart, what happened to his purely practical judgment?

There is a paragraph in the first part of Dr. Peikoff's article, which answers this question. Reading it, I had an eerie feeling, as if a psychologist were describing the nature of Mr. Nixon's thought-processes - yet that paragraph was written over two years ago, about a philosophy originated in the past century:

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.

Mr. Nixon's desperate, contradictory, incomprehensible actions were aimed at "reconstructing" the situation (even though it is unlikely that he had ever heard of this particular metaphysical prescription). But the malleable material of reality stubbornly refused to let itself be reconstructed.

This, dear readers, is an example of philosophy's power - of what a particular philosophic theory, pragmatism, did to its most consistent practitioner.

Ayn Rand

#### OBJECTIVIST CALENDAR

Starting on November 1, the taped lectures of Dr. Leonard Peikoff's course, Founders of Western Philosophy: Thales to Hume, will be given in Minneapolis. For further information, contact Jane Kettleson at (612) 633-4085 (evenings).

B.W.