

On the Duty of Natural Outlaws to Shut Up

di Murray N. Rothbard

Since anarchists and other libertarians are, to say the least, an embattled minority, we have tended to be indulgent toward anyone and everyone in our ranks, even those who have been busily pecking away at the vitals of the libertarian position. Or, to change our metaphor, who have been picking off stragglers as we try to continue our march against the State. Without going all the way with Orthodox Randians who excommunicate anyone that makes a slight error over Concept or Percept, or who confesses a sneaking preference for Bach over Chopin, I say it is high time to take off the gloves in the struggle against those whom Sam Konkin incisively calls "Natural Outlaws!" (Or, as in the classic joke about Hitler in the Bunker. "From now on, no more Mr. Nice Guy!")

For many years now, first as anarcho-Stirnerites and now also as anarcho-pragmatists, the Natural Outlaws have been firing away from inside their supposedly impregnable fortress of ethical nihilism, sneering at such fundamentals of libertarianism as individual rights and rational ethical principles. Since the Outlaws stand for nothing, they believe they can remain permanently blessed with the advantage of the strategic offensive. They are akin to some group who might, say, pester physicists with the demand: "Nyah, nyah, prove to me that physics is a science!" If the physicist tries to defend himself, it is seemingly easy for the critic, secure in his ignorance, to keep up the verbal challenge. I remember once a young libertarian (who, characteristically, was soon to become a lifelong Orthodox Randian) saying to me, in all seriousness, "How do *they* (Establishment astronomers) know that the sun is 93 million miles away? To me it looks like a few thousands miles!" And how, indeed, could an "Establishment" astronomer reply verbally, unless to say, "For Chrissake. go, study!" And this is also the proper answer to those who challenge the existence of rights and moral principles. The standard rebuttal of the Outlaws that moral theorists or rights theorists differ among themselves, doesn't wash either; for so do physicists and astronomers, but this hardly means that no such disciplines exist.

The nihilists remind me of the classic bore at college bull sessions: "Nyah, nyah, prove to me that this chair exists!" Trying desperately for "proof accomplishes nothing, of course, to wipe the mocking smile off the face of the Outlaw. In a deep sense, and on many levels, the proper riposte is to hit the Outlaw over the head with the chair. For one thing, the purpose of philosophic discourse is, or should be, to arrive mutually at the truth, not to engage in parlor games or verbal fencing. To engage in such games, to be a bravura pest for pest's sake, is to put oneself outside the realm of rational discourse. (But this, of course, is a moral as well as factual statement!)

It is high time, then, that ethicists and natural lawyers take the strategic and tactical offensive. The fastest and most thorough way of disposing of a philosophic enemy, as all good Aristotelians know, is to show that he is mired inextricably in self-contradiction. In this essay, I propose to show that anarcho-pragmatism and anarcho-Stirnerism (or at least their preaching) is self-contradictory and therefore wrong *on their own terms*.

First, the trouble with pragmatism, and especially anarcho-pragmatism, is that *it doesn't work*. And since pragmatists believe that the only truth is whatever "works" that settles that (setting aside such deep problems as the meaning of "work", work for "what!" etc.)

Take, for example, the severe criticisms that Jorge Amador, the guru of anarcho-pragmatism, has made of the Bergland-Lewis Presidential campaign, in his organ *The Pragmatist*. Amador's critique is that the LP was (a) too gradualist, and also (b) ideological. In other words, his preferred campaign would be radical anarchist to the hilt, *and yet* non-ideological. That is, all talk of moral principles or rights would be tossed aside. Not only that: we could no longer call the State an organization of a criminal ruling class, because "crime" itself is a moral and natural-law concept, and presumes immoral criminals ripping off innocent victims. So what would an Amadorean LP campaigner talk

about? He would confine himself to demonstrating the pragmatic virtues of the radical anarchist alternative.

But this is a tall order indeed. In fact, a virtually impossible one. The pragmatic radical anarchist is faced immediately with powerful critiques from pragmatic statist. He can show, for example, that anarchy would increase production, yield a higher standard of living, etc., in the long run. But in the short run, lots of the privileged, subsidized, or monopolistic would be cast adrift. All these short-run and maybe intermediate-run problems could only be offset by vague future benefits. But why, pragmatically, should everyone prefer the long-run to the short-run? What about the high-time preference people, who thus challenge the Amadorean: "Look here, fella. I know the pragmatic benefits I'm getting from the current system. And I *know*, too, the headaches, the disruptions, the losses that I and lots of others will suffer during the lengthy 'transition' period. Even if you've convinced me that eventually I might benefit, these benefits are too chancy and too long-run for me to want to risk it!" And if the average person cannot be sold on radical immediatist anarchism, *a fortiori* the criminal ruling class, those net beneficiaries of the State, they who might well be losers even in the long-run, certainly won't be convinced. At *best*, the Amadorsymp will say: "Well, I admit this anarchism sounds pretty good. But pragmatically, to ease the transition and minimize the costs that even you admit, let's move toward the ideal very, very gradually!" And we are back, willy-nilly, to the Republican or Democrat Party, the master "gradualists" of us all.

It is no accident, then, that Democrats and Republicans proudly *call themselves* "pragmatists!" Sure, they believe in freedom, in peace, in free markets, in all the goodies, but these goals have to be approached, they tell us, piecemeal, by the groping push-and-pull of the democratic consensus. And we are back hip deep in the *status quo*. "Radical pragmatism" of any sort, whether anarcho or Khomeini or whatever, is virtually a contradiction in terms.

But this is only the beginning of our story. For it is also no accident that never in history has pragmatism inspired any sort of radical or revolutionary movement for social change. For who in hell would join a radical minority movement, and commit him- or herself for life to social obloquy and a marginal existence, for the sake of 20 % more bathtubs, or 15 % more candy bars? Who will man the barricades, either physically or spiritually, for more peanuts or Pepsi? Look at all radical or revolutionary movements of the 20th century, whether they be Communist or fascist or Khomeiniite. Did *they* struggle and move mountains for a few more goods and services, for what we used to call "bathtub economics?" Hell no, they moved mountains and made history out of a deep moral passion that would not be denied. What moves men and women and changes history is ideology, moral values, deep beliefs and principles.

It is no coincidence, then, that even in the libertarian movement, the people who have stuck to it over the years have been almost exclusively the believers in rights and possessors of moral passion. The libertarian pragmatists, what the Marxists call "economists", have generally hived off to good jobs and have forgotten any movement concerns. (Alan Greenspan? Provided he was ever a genuine libertarian. - J.Z.) And, by their lights, why not? Why not let the crazy ideologues worry about the movement and about liberty? The pragmatists, as usual, will just take what comes.

Anarcho-Pragmatism then, simply doesn't work. It cannot push radicalism among the public, and it cannot build a radical movement. All it can do is subvert, weaken, and, if unchecked, even destroy the libertarian movement which the anarcho-pragmatists claim they are striving to strengthen and promote. Objectively, anarcho-pragmatists can only function as wreckers of libertarianism. And since moral passion and ideology work and pragmatism doesn't, the anarcho-pragmatists have a pragmatic *obligation* either to convert to natural rights, or, at the very least, to *pretend* to convert and then use natural rights and ideology as a weapon with which to build an anarchist movement. Objectively, then, and *on their own terms*, the anarcho-pragmatists have a solemn duty to surrender, to shut up about their doctrines and abandon the field.

The same is true of the anarcho-Stirnerites, they who proclaim loudly that all moral principles and rights are mere "spooks in the head!" internalized restraints upon their sovereign will. To the Stirnerites, only might makes right, and each individual has the right to grab whatever he wishes. It

has always struck me as ludicrous for a dozen or so anarcho-Stirnerites to swagger around, proclaiming that might is the only right. In any contest of might between the anarcho- Stirnerites and the State, who do they think is going to win? For a tiny minority to preach might- makes-right makes no sense whatever. In fact, what makes sense, from either a pragmatic or a Stirnerite point of view, is to proclaim one's absolute devotion to individual rights even if one doesn't believe it. And what in the world should stop a pragmatist or a Stirnerite from lying in this way? Surely, not devotion to absolute truth, the denial of which is crucial to the nihilist creeds of pragmatism and Stirnerism!

The Stirnerite obligation, on Stirnerite grounds, to pretend to be a moralist and a believer in property rights runs even deeper than that. For who in the world will deal with or trust any person who loudly proclaims his contempt for property rights and moral principles? It should be obvious to the thickest Stirnerite that if he wants to pursue a ruthless amoral policy of steal and grab, he could not do so by proclaiming Stirnerism to the high heavens. No, as Machiavelli counseled the Prince, the Prince must pretend to morality and the Christian virtues while secretly practising the opposite whenever opportunities arise. (Oddly enough, Machiavelli himself violated his own rule by proclaiming Machiavellism!) So therefore Stirnerism itself requires that Stirnerites shut up and pretend to be moralists and natural lawmen. And, once again, any balking at such pretense in the name of devotion to truth would, in itself, violate Stirnerism by surrendering Stirnerite self-interest to the constraining "spook" of objective truth.

(Compare Kant's remarks, in his "Eternal Peace", on maxims that cannot stand publicity in order to succeed in their realization, as being wrong, and maxims that require publicity for their realization as being right. - J.Z., 29.10.05.)

But, you might ask, if the Stirnerites and pragmatists surrender to their own logic and shut up and pretend to be natural lawyers, would I not be worried that their seeming conversion to rights and moral principles might be mendacious and inauthentic? No. I would cheerfully embrace that uncertainty for an end to the pollution of anarcho-nihilism and its baneful influence upon the libertarian movement. Let them practise their pragmatic or Stirnerite rites in the closet if they wish; they will at least have been neutralized.

But suppose, after my demonstration of their bounden duty, the anarcho-pragmatists and Stirnerites pay no heed, and keep sounding off anyway, as I strongly suspect will be the case. What will thus be demonstrated about the true motivations of our anarcho-nihilist comrades? Could it be, dare I say it, that they really don't give a hoot about the truth or principles of anarcho-pragmatism or anarcho-nihilism, and that, like the guy at the college bull session, they are simply interested in calling attention to themselves and being a pain-in-the-rear for its own sake? And if so, and I fear we may be driven to that conclusion, then the treatment they will deserve will be metaphorically the same as the guy hit by the chair. For they will have shown themselves to be outside the realm of rational discourse. They will be Outlaws indeed.