

How to Read (and Not to Write)

by Ayn Rand

This article was published in The Ayn Rand Letter, September 25, 1972.

“He was doling his sentences out with cautious slowness, balancing himself between word and intonation to hit the right degree of semi-clarity. He wanted her to understand, but he did not want her to understand fully, explicitly, down to the root—since the essence of that modern language, which he had learned to speak expertly, was never to let oneself or others understand anything down to the root.” [*Atlas Shrugged.*]

Today, this is the dominant method of communication in public speaking and writing, particularly on the subject of politics. A recent editorial in *The New York Times* is a valuable specimen of that method—an unusually clear example of the art of unclarity.

“The Fourth of July is a good time to remind ourselves that there is urgent necessity for the nation’s intellectual and political leaders to provide moral guidance at a time when so many people feel that the nation has lost its way,” said the Times, concluding an editorial, on July 4, 1972.

This statement is incontrovertibly true, and one would be tempted to say “amen”—but the rest of the editorial is a remarkable example of the reasons why the nation has lost its way (though not in the sense the editorial intended).

The most important issue confronting us today, the editorial declares, is “how to prevent powerful special interests from frustrating the democratic process.” No definitions are given, but the context suggests that “special interests” means pressure groups. This is not exactly a fundamental issue, but this is what the editorial regards as an urgent problem. To solve a problem, one must identify and correct or eliminate its causes; therefore,

one would expect the editorial writer to mention what caused the emergence of pressure groups. But he does not. He treats the subject as if pressure groups were facts of nature or irreducible primaries.

It is interesting to wonder what went on in that writer's mind in the space between two paragraphs—because the editorial continues by attacking those who might name the unnamed causes he did not find it necessary to mention:

That issue is so difficult to solve because all the clear, simple extremes are unworkable. Given modern industrial technologies, this country cannot go back to the highly atomistic, competitive model of the early nineteenth century—even if it were willing to accept the workings of the marketplace as the arbiter of all social values and outcomes. But the experience of totalitarian and democratic societies alike suggests that mere substitution of the power of big government for that of big business and the marketplace is no solution.

As an exercise in intellectual precision, see how many things you can list as wrong in that one little paragraph. I shall indicate some of them (omitting the paragraph's first sentence, which I shall take up later).

If a euphemism is an inoffensive way of identifying an offensive fact, then “highly atomistic, competitive model” is an anti-euphemism, i.e., an offensive way of identifying an inoffensive (or great and noble) fact—in this case, capitalism. “Competitive” is a definition by nonessentials; “atomistic” is worse. Capitalism involves competition as one of its proper consequences, not as its essential or defining attribute. “Atomistic” is usually intended to imply “scattered, broken up, disintegrated.” Capitalism is the system that made productive cooperation possible among men, on a large scale—a *voluntary* cooperation that raised everyone's standard of living—as the nineteenth century has demonstrated. So “atomistic” is an anti-euphemism, standing for “free, independent, individualistic.” If the editorial's sentence were intended to be fully understood, it would read: “this country cannot go back to the free, individualistic, private-property system of capitalism.”

Now why would “modern industrial technologies” make a return to capitalism impossible? No answer is given. It is fashionable to treat technology as a dark mystery, as a kind of black magic beyond the layman’s power to understand—so the phrase is just thrown in, as an ineffable threat. But observe that modern industrial technology is a product of capitalism and, today, of the private sector of the U.S. economy, which is still the freest economy on earth—observe the abysmal failure of the world’s most controlled economy, Soviet Russia, to approach America’s technological achievements—observe the correlation, in all the mixed economies, between the degree of a country’s freedom and the degree of its technological development—and you will have grounds to suspect that that phrase was thrown in to prevent you from realizing that modern industrial technology (if it is to survive) makes statism, not capitalism, impossible.

The clause “even if it [this country] were willing to accept the workings of the marketplace as the arbiter of all social values and outcomes” is an attack on a straw man. No advocate of capitalism ever held the workings of the marketplace as the arbiter of *all* social values and outcomes—only of the economic ones, i.e., those pertaining to production and trade. In a free marketplace, these values and outcomes are determined by a free, general, “democratic” vote—by the sales, purchases, and choices of every individual. And—as one indication of the fact that, under capitalism, there are social values outside the power of the marketplace—each individual votes only on those matters which he is qualified to judge: on his own preferences, interests, and needs. The paramount social value he has no power to encroach upon is: the rights of others. He cannot substitute his vote and judgment for theirs; he cannot declare himself to be “the voice of the people” and leave the people disenfranchised.

Is this what our country would be unwilling to accept?

The last sentence of the quoted paragraph resorts to the shabby old gimmick of equating opposites by substituting nonessentials for their essential characteristics. In this case, the defacing acid, obliterating differences, is the attribute of “bigness.” If a reader is to be made to feel that businessmen and dictators are interchangeably equal villains, he must be pushed to forget that a *big* productive genius, e.g., Henry Ford, Sr., and a *big* killer, e.g., Stalin, are not the same thing—and that the difference between a totalitarian and a free society does not consist in substituting

Stalin for Henry Ford, Sr. (For a discussion of the difference between economic and political power, see “America’s Persecuted Minority: Big Business” in my book *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*.)

When the baser kind of politician resorts to that gimmick, he is counting on the ugliest emotion of lesser people—envy—and if they confuse “bigness” with “greatness,” it serves his purpose. But why would a reputable newspaper do it?

The editorial’s next paragraph gives a clue to the answer: “The crucial task facing the United States and other democratic societies is to find workable answers between the extremes—to limit concentrations of corporate power without undermining the efficiency of business; to permit the market to allocate resources insofar as possible—but also to use adequate resources to achieve socially desirable purposes in response to the democratically exercised choices of the society.”

Who is to *permit* the market to allocate resources? Whose resources? What are “socially desirable purposes”? Who desires them—and at whose expense? Since the greatest, the fundamental, factor (“resource”) of production is human intelligence, is it to be disposed of by the “choices of the society”?

No explicit answers are given. But observe the workings of the unnamed in the above quotation. The two “extremes” are capitalism (i.e., freedom) and totalitarianism (i.e., dictatorship). The “workable answers” are to be sought in the middle, in a combination of these two. Observe the method suggested. Business efficiency must not be undermined (which is an implicit admission that this efficiency depends on freedom)—but government must control the development and limit the growth of business. The market must be kept free “insofar as possible” —but if “society” desires some particular “purpose,” freedom becomes impossible. Which of the two “extremes” is violated and which is given priority in this suggested method?

So it turns out that the editorial writer is advocating the very thing which he falsely ascribed to capitalism: he is suggesting that the marketplace *should be made* “the arbiter of all social values and outcomes”—not, however, the clean, economic marketplace, but the corrupt, *political* one. (An intrusion of political power, i.e., of force, into the market is corrupt and corrupting, since it introduces an opportunity for legalized looting.) He is

using the word “democratic” in its original meaning, i.e., unlimited majority rule, and he is urging us to accept a social system in which one’s work, one’s property, one’s mind, and one’s life are at the mercy of any gang that may muster the vote of a majority at any moment for any purpose.

If this is a society’s system, no power on earth can prevent men from ganging up on one another in self-defense—i.e., from forming *pressure groups*.

“There is no magic formula for reconciling those aims,” the editorial continues. “Instead, this nation and all others can only seek to diffuse power by such measures as more effectively employing the antitrust laws ...” etc.

After raising so momentous a problem as the attempt to mix freedom and dictatorship (an attempt which has brought us where we are today)—after demonstrating (between the lines) that these two extremes cannot mix and that there is, indeed, no magic formula for reconciling opposites or for having your cake and eating it, too—the editorial proceeds to suggest such remedies as: the miserably false, decrepit notion of persecutions by antitrust laws; a “sense of mission” in regulatory agencies; “new types of regulatory institutions” on the order of “public-interest crusaders” with an “‘ombudsman’ role both within and outside government” (i.e., the most vicious of pressure groups: quasi-governmental private groups); the abolition of “the illegal financing of political campaigns by great corporations or labor unions”; etc., etc. (with not a word about how to “diffuse” the other power in that mixture, the power of the government).

This is offered as *moral* guidance for a nation that has lost its way.

If I were using that editorial for an actual test of reading comprehension, I would give A + to anyone who would discover why the word “moral” is introduced at the conclusion of a piece that does not discuss morality. If you look past the modern verbiage, you will find, smuggled between the lines, the thing which the editorial writer wants you “to understand, but not to understand fully, explicitly, down to the root”: altruism. It is not any practical considerations, not “modern industrial technologies,” or “the workings of the marketplace,” or economics, or politics, or reality, that make it impossible for us to return to capitalism—to freedom, progress, abundance—it is the altruist moral code, which the editorial is struggling to preserve in the form of “socially desirable purposes” that supersede individual rights. The “workable answer” it exhorts us to seek, is how to

combine capitalism with the creed of self-sacrifice. Brother, it can't be done. I have been saying it for years. You may take it now from the horse's mouth—from an editorial written, apparently, in the horse's unguarded moment.

It is futile to bemoan this country's moral decadence or blame politicians for the "credibility gap" if this is the kind of guidance the nation is given by its intellectual leaders. Credibility? It is almost a miracle that the nation has managed to preserve some unconquerable element of decency and common sense, instead of collapsing altogether into a sewer of amoral, anti-intellectual cynicism and skepticism under a cultural barrage of that kind.

Politicians are not the cause of a culture's trend, only its consequence. They get their notions from the cultural atmosphere, particularly from newspapers, magazines, and TV commentaries; they speak as these media teach them to speak. Who teaches the media?

And now we come down to the root: of all our institutions, it is the universities that are primarily responsible for this country losing its way—and of all the university departments, it is the departments of philosophy.

If you want to see what makes things such as that editorial possible, you will find the hoofprints of Pragmatism in two key sentences: "That issue is so difficult to solve because all the clear, simple extremes are unworkable," and: "There is no magic formula for reconciling those aims."

By "clear, simple extremes," modern intellectuals mean any rational theory, any consistent system, any conceptual integration, any precise definition, any firm principle. Pragmatists do not mean that no such theory, system, or principle has yet been discovered (and that we should look for one), but that none is possible. Epistemologically, their dogmatic agnosticism holds, as an absolute, that a *principle is false because it is a principle*—that conceptual integration (i.e., thinking) is impractical or "simplistic" —that an idea which is clear and simple is necessarily "extreme and unworkable." Along with Kant, their philosophic forefather, the pragmatists claim, in effect: "If you perceive it, it cannot be real," and: "If you conceive of it, it cannot be true."

What, then, is left to man? The sensation, the wish, the whim, the range, and the concrete of the moment. Since no solution to any problem is possible, anyone's suggestion, guess, or edict is as valid as anyone else's—provided it is narrow enough.

To give you an example: if a building were threatened with collapse and you declared that the crumbling foundation has to be rebuilt, a pragmatist would answer that your solution is too abstract, extreme, unprovable, and that immediate priority must be given to the need of putting ornaments on the balcony railings, because it would make the tenants feel better.

There was a time when a man would not utter arguments of this sort, for fear of being rightly considered a fool. Today, Pragmatism has not merely given him permission to do it and liberated him from the necessity of thought, but has elevated his mental default into an intellectual virtue, has given him the right to dismiss thinkers (or construction engineers) as naive, and has endowed him with that typically modern quality: the arrogance of the concrete-bound, who takes pride in not seeing the forest fire, or the forest, or the trees, while he is studying one inch of bark on a rotted tree stump.

Like all of Kant's progeny, modern philosophy has a single goal: the defeat of reason. The degree to which such philosophers succeed is the degree to which men and nations lose their way in a deepening night of insolvable problems.

The human products of that philosophy—on all levels of today's society—are the crude skeptics and another, more offensive breed: the professional "seeker of truth" who hopes to God he'll never find it.

If you meet one of those (and they are ubiquitous), you will find the answer to his problems—and to the dilemmas of modern philosophy—in another passage from *Atlas Shrugged*: "Do you cry that you find no answers? By what means did you hope to find them? You reject your tool of perception—your mind—then complain that the universe is a mystery. You discard your key, then wail that all doors are locked against you. You start out in pursuit of the irrational, then damn existence for making no sense."