

Letters

The Perplexed Critics

Stephen Cox ("Albert Jay Nock: Prophet of Libertarianism," March 1992) wonders what a good libertarian like Albert Jay Nock could have seen in the works of Henry George. Tolstoy's recent biographer wondered the same about Tolstoy. The wonderment of these modern writers would turn into amazement if they could confront the long list of highly respected lovers of liberty who, like Nock and Tolstoy, heard the clarion call of Henry George.

Actually, the old single-taxer has such a seductive appeal to libertarians that we can only applaud the strategy of contemptuous dismissal that modern writers employ. People need to be warned that Henry George was a crackpot, so they will know better than to read his works and risk being overpowered by his magic, as were Nock, Tolstoy, Winston Churchill, Admiral Spruance, Helen Keller, and so many otherwise right-thinking people.

Robert Tideman
San Francisco, Cal.

Wrangling for Fetuses

R.W. Bradford says that he finds the abortion debate "long and boring" ("Less is More, More or Less," March 1992). Tiring and frustrating I can understand, but not boring — for much more than abortion rides on the outcome. The become-a-person concept presupposes two classes of human beings, an upper class of persons and an underclass of non-persons. That libertarians, of all people, can hold this premise worries me very much. Yet I find it fascinating to watch abortion choicers wrangle among themselves while they search for solid ground on which to rest their case.

Doris Gordon
Wheaton, Md.

Fetus Theories

In his letter (March 1992) about my review ("Peikoff's Objectivism: An Autopsy," January 1992) of Leonard Peikoff's book, David Braatz addresses a series of questions to me. One or two of these appear to be good-natured leg-pulls, but in the remaining cases, where Mr Braatz seems to be genuinely perplexed, I will try to help him.

"How is a fetus . . . programmed? By whom? Or what?" By its genes.

"Is every fetus conscious of its theories?" I didn't suggest that any fetus was conscious of anything (though, in view of the fact that fetuses can be trained to recognize speech-patterns they will subsequently encounter after birth, I wouldn't want to rule it out, either).

"What meaning can a theory have to an embryo with no language or concepts?" A cat can form the theory that if it hears a can being opened it is about to be fed. The same cat can then revise or discard that theory. So language is not essential to theory formation or revision. We don't know enough to be sure that a fetus doesn't have concepts. A non-conscious computer can form and evaluate theories. Aside from all this, I'm not committed to the view that the theories with which a fetus is programmed have any "meaning" to that fetus, any more than a theory embodied in a book or diskette has any meaning to that book or diskette.

"What happened to adults who wouldn't recognize a theory if one bit them?" Many adults wouldn't recognize an adverb, a natural number, or a litotes, but most adults employ these devices daily. Similarly, all adults have developed their intellectual capacities by formulating, criticizing, and revising theories.

"Will my revised theories be passed on to any eggs I fertilize?" In the opinion of August Weismann and me: Only if you catch these fertilized eggs later, and give them a good talking to.

In my review I pointed out that Peikoff always "stops where the interesting questions start." Mr Braatz complains, on the evidence of my review, that I'm no better. But surely this is unfair. A full-sized book on philosophy might be expected to pursue details that a brief review doesn't.

Furthermore, the Critical Rationalist standpoint that I broadly agree with is elaborated in a great many books and articles (Karl Popper's *Objective Knowledge*, Jagdish Hattiangadi's *How is Language Possible?*, Radnitzky and Bartley's *Evolutionary Epistemology, Rationality, and the Sociology of Knowledge*, to mention just a few). These works can hardly be accused

of always avoiding the interesting or difficult questions. There are also many published writings sympathetic to the Randist point of view, but here the great majority are afflicted with the same peculiarity as Peikoff. They nearly all stop where the interesting and awkward questions begin. Their central dogma and implicit motto: "Nothing is the least bit puzzling!"

David Ramsay Steele
Chicago, Ill.

Equilibrate This

Contrary to Michael Rothchild's protest, Ross Overbeek was much too soft in his review ("Economics vs Bionomics," March 1992) of Rothchild's book and article ("Beyond Austrian Economics," January 1992). Rothchild's biological analogy of economics may be appropriate in describing some processes, but much of Rothchild's discussion of "equilibrium" reads like the work of an overeager first-year graduate student who has discovered his first Ludwig Lachmann hangar.

Some economists overuse and misapply the theoretical construct called equilibrium, but this is no reason to condemn every use of it. In its proper place, such as comparing a world with rent control to one without (everything else being equal), the elementary texts' static equilibrium model is extremely useful in forcing students to think through all the implications of rent regulation.

Rothchild's vociferous defense of his writings ("Contra Overbeek," March 1992) suggests he is someone who hasn't read enough economics to quite know where his minor criticisms fit in.

Paul Geddes
Burnaby, B.C.

A Fine Point

In the March 1992 issue of *Liberty* Michael Rothchild says: "And *Bionomics* explains why the appropriate use of a limited government for specific community purposes . . . is not inconsistent with bionomic thinking."

Well, that's fine.

But it is inconsistent with free-market thinking.

Chris Pickering
Lakewood, Colo.

A Lone Reviewer and His Lonely Source

I am disappointed that my friend Sheldon Richman has chosen to write a semi-

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