

Principle = Practice



Send him mail.



“Food for Thought” is an original bi-weekly column appearing every other Tuesday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Norman Imberman. Norman is a retired podiatrist who loves playing piano, writing music, lawn bowling, bridge, reading, classical music, going to movies, plays, concerts and traveling. Archived columns can be found here. FFT-only RSS feed available here.

(Editor’s note: This article originally appeared in The Individualist, March 1971. Since its initial presentation, new words, sentences and phrases were added, while some words and lines have been deleted.)

“That’s very well and good in principle, but I believe in being practical.” “I agree with you in principle, but you’re just an idealist. It won’t work in practice.” One can hear such epistemological nonsense reverberating through the halls of universities, in political corridors, during TV discussions and in newspapers throughout the world. It pervades the atmosphere like an invisible hand, choking off the last remnant of whatever hope is left for man to survive on this planet.

When someone is referred to as an “idealist,” he is actually being called a dreamer — a fool. The accuser is just using a euphemism, for the sake of being polite. What the accuser is actually saying is that there is no relationship between principle and practice, that one must be sacrificed to the other in order for there to be success, and any person who thinks otherwise is not being “realistic.” However, the joke is on the accuser, for it is he who is being unrealistic. Out of such sophistry man is now on a collision course with a self-inflicted nightmare instead of a dream.

From the moment that man emerged as a rational animal, he began to ask questions. Why? The bird, the horse, the ape, cannot ask that one vital question. Why? To ask a question presupposes a purpose. The rest of the animal world does not ask such a question because their means of survival are inherent in their own identities—their reactions to threats, means of gathering food, means of protecting their young and reactions to changes in their environment are automatic. To man survival is the essential purpose upon which all of his other purposes depend. However, survival to man is not automatic, and is not what survival is to the jungle beast. Human survival means living a happy, fulfilling,

productive life; a life free of dangers, which chronically plague the rest of the animal world. In order to accomplish this task, man must be able to live in peaceful coexistence with his fellow man. This does not merely mean with his next door neighbor, but also with his fellow countryman, the man on the next continent and perhaps even with the “man” on the next planet.

As man stepped out from the darkness of the cave and began to discover answers to his questions, enlightenment began but progress was slow. By “progress” I mean the process by which man learns to overcome threats to his survival and to improve the quality of his life.

What is the essential factor that led to human progress? The answer is that man discovered principles. When man discovered (not invented) the principles of aerodynamics, he flew. When he discovered the principles of thermodynamics, he invented methods of mechanically heating his home and refrigerating his food. When he discovered the principles of gravity and motion, a whole new world was opened to him. All of these principles always existed and governed man’s actions long before he discovered them — or even before he discovered that there were such things as principles. But until man consciously identified the principles of nature he could not understand them, and hence he could not use them for his benefit.

For every human goal, there are methods of achieving it. Inherent in every method are principles, which must first be discovered if one wants to attain that goal. There may be many different methods of attaining the same goal. However, every one of those methods must follow natural principles, or failure will result. This is true for both physical and sociological phenomena. Emotional commitments may make it difficult for many to accept the principles underlying sociological phenomena, but that does not disprove their existence. Ignoring a fact does not change it.

Since principles of action are inherent in all entities, it should be quite clear that to assert that something is true “in principle,” but not “in practice,” is to maintain a contradiction. It is the principle of an entity that makes it “work.”

How then does man know when he has made a mistake, when a relationship or a cause which he has held to be true, is in fact false? One means is through the recognition of inconsistency and contradiction. *Contradiction* is the maintenance of different and irreconcilable positions on the same issue. *Inconsistency* is the failure to utilize a principle when it applies after one admits that the principle is a fact, or admitting to a principle but failing to live by it when it becomes inconvenient. Hypocrisy is a form of inconsistency. The identifying of a contradiction is man’s method of discovering that he has made an error or will make an error if he continues on the same path.

If a man states that he believes in the principle of free trade but wants a protective tariff on automobiles because the production of domestic cars bolsters our economy and is in “the national interest,” he is holding a contradiction. This is indicative of error. If a man states that he believes that men should be free, but wants the State to “control” prices, he is holding a contradiction and that is indicative of error. If a man states that he believes that each individual has a right to his own property and life, but is in favor of rent control, he is holding a contradiction and that is indicative of error. If a woman states that she believes in free choice when it involves her right to decide what to do with her own body but at the same time believes that a worker should not have free choice to accept any wage that he wants, or that an apartment owner should not have free choice to ask any rent that he deems necessary, *it is indicative of an error.*

Errors cannot be continued with impunity indefinitely. The very nature of error means that some undesired consequence will result, even though one may not see the undesired consequence immediately. When an individual violates a principle, the error cannot continue for long. As a result, the effect of individual error will generally be of minor consequence and can easily be corrected. However, when errors are practiced by entire cultures for decades, the effects must necessarily be catastrophic. Most often the undesired effects are long delayed.

The correction of widespread social error is difficult, even when the error is finally identified. Persons in power are usually effective in hiding the true causes of social problems, a deceit upon which their power often depends since *they* frequently are the cause. However, even in the absence of such a “credibility gap,” the identification of social problems necessarily becomes ever more difficult with the passing of time. As the original violation of principle and resultant catastrophe become increasingly remote from each other, it becomes a monumental task to trace the long causal chain of events that brought on the disaster. As a result, as public error persists, and public “solutions” fail, all kinds of superfluous and nugatory rationalizations are offered for the continuance of widespread social problems. In fact, the solutions offered are always the same “solutions” that caused the catastrophe in the first place.

Today we are witnessing the result of many years of evasion of the causal principles upon which any free and prosperous society depends. For years, intellectuals, politicians and citizen pressure groups have demanded the initiation of force by government to “cure” our social problems. That policy of coercion is now being brought to fruition with its inevitable results. If it is the goal of people to be destructive, to create a world of war, crime, poverty, disease and famine, then the method of attaining such a goal must be consonant with principles that can achieve such an end. The principle underlying such an insane goal would be that any person, group or organization should have the right to initiate force against the life or property of another individual, group or organization. It is self-evident

that such a means will attain the desired end. It is tantamount to the waging of domestic war, but in a civilized society calling it class warfare. In fact, the principle, the method and the result are categorically the same. The principle is anti-life, the method is coercion and the result is death.

On the other hand, if the goal of people is to achieve a happy, fulfilling and productive life, living in peaceful coexistence with their fellow men, then the opposite principle must be accepted. That is, the principle that *no* person, group or organization should have the right to initiate force against the life or property of another individual, group or organization. The method in this case is the voluntary contract, and the result is life.

For those who deny the validity of the principle banning the initiation of force by all to attain peaceful coexistence, there is only one conceivable (but unworkable) alternative. It can be stated as follows: In order to achieve peaceful coexistence among men, it is necessary that some individuals, groups or organizations should have the right and power to initiate force against others. Such a doctrine leads to a mess of insolvable problems and contradictions about which volumes of books have already been written. In fact, such a doctrine of legal coercion has been the principle upon which the human species has functioned throughout recorded history.

The doctrine of legal coercion by an elite, or a majority, or even a minority cannot claim the consistency of any principle whatsoever. The persons who hold such a doctrine must answer the question: where do they get the special “right” to initiate force, which the individual does not possess? What makes it proper for them, but not for others, to initiate force? This “ethical position” is in reality not a principle, but an absence of a principle. It is, in effect, a no-holds-barred, hodge-podge system, whereby self-styled “humanitarians” vie for power, with the inevitable result of gang warfare. Today the process is simply labeled “democratic” to give it an air of respectability, order and rightness — in line with the prevailing social mythology. However, the “benefits” of initiatory force are purely illusory.

The general evasion by men of the relationship between principle and practice, of cause to effect; is finally bearing its bitter fruit. Witness what we now face: wars, riots, drug abuse, pollution, crime, a failing monetary system, a failing education system, a failing health system and an actual threat of complete annihilation. Apologists for a corrupt government rationalize, “but we have a system of checks and balances.” However the only checks we actually do have is the “check” against being free and imminent “balanced poverty.” A system in which *some* people may initiate force will necessarily evolve either into a system whereby *anybody* may initiate force, or into a system where *nobody* can do anything without permission — chaos or slavery. Which do you prefer, chaos or slavery? We are presently experiencing both.

The initiation of force is destructive no matter who the initiator is, no matter how many

people vote (i.e., sanction) for it, and no matter how many people are doing the initiating. It will inevitably result in the exact opposite of the rational goal of peaceful coexistence and prosperity, for it is an attempt to make the impossible work.

Since the conquest of obstacles is necessary for the survival and progress of the human species, the only rational function of government is to create an atmosphere whereby man is free to overcome obstacles. Government must not be an obstacle itself, nor should it create artificial obstacles — as it is now doing and has been doing since its inception. Its only proper function is to protect the life and property of the individual, without initiating force and then butt out.

To state that principle and practice are opposites is to deny the Law of Identity. It is to state that A is not A; that a thing is not what it is. There is no dichotomy between principle and practice. The point is that if you know what your goal is, and if you understand the principles underlying the realization of that goal, any method that you employ must be consistent with both your goal and the principles that underlie it. Therefore, rationally strive for your goals by never practicing or condoning any methods that contradict it.