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PERSUASION®

VIEWS

THE PLAYGROUND: TESTING GROUND FOR THE FUTURE OF AMERICA ..by Joyce F. Jones

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VIEWS

Where will he go from here?

The Playground: Testing Ground For The Future Of America

Many people state that the future destiny of freedom and capitalism in America rests totally in the hands of statesmen, political theorists, and intellectuals. Does it? I sometimes wonder.

It is true that some intellectuals are supplying us with the ammunition necessary to win the battle for liberty against the encroachments of collectivism today. But who's going to use the ammunition? Where's the battle going to be fought?

The battle line stretches from the soap box to the ballot box and the jury box and the petty cash box. But the battle to preserve the principles of individual rights in a free society begins in a box most people never think of: the sandbox in the playground.

The sandbox?

Yes, the children of today are the citizens, statesmen, and intellectuals of tomorrow. They have to learn to exercise their rights, to value capitalism and liberty and to fight for them. Their parents play a crucial role as teachers. In this sense, then, the destiny of freedom may well depend upon how successfully the parents of America learn and teach the lessons of liberty—most specifically, respect for the individual person; respect for individual rights, particularly property rights; the value of justice; and the value of persuasion and reason, not force and whim, as the proper way to deal with others in a free society.

These principles are embodied in the U. S. Constitution, which guarantees the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In a free society, the exercise of these rights requires a great deal from adult citizens; namely, the virtues of independent judgment (to discover the truth and to make

judgments about political, economic, and personal issues), integrity (to remain loyal to these judgments in action) and moral courage (to protect and defend these judgments). The exercise of rights also implies one crucial responsibility: the responsibility to respect the rights of others.

If all of these principles apply to adult citizens, what about children? Do they have rights and responsibilities? Are they capable of developing the knowledge and virtues that freedom requires?

As the mother of a young child, it has been my experience that many parents and teachers treat children as second-class citizens—they have too little respect for children as individuals with rights, too little trust in their ability to judge issues for themselves, and too little confidence that children can learn to respect others and to choose values and goals in a reasonable manner.

But children are people, too! Little people, little citizens. They have rights, hopes, desires, abilities and responsibilities that are the same as those of adults, *in miniature*. The fact that they have many unactualized potentials, that they do not always choose what is best for them, that they are unable to make all their decisions alone, that they do not have the knowledge to survive independently —these facts should not be regarded as proof that they are, in effect, little animals who have to be controlled and *forced* to learn the first lessons of good citizenship.

On the contrary, I would contend that children cannot be forced to value freedom. Force and freedom are opposites. One does not beget the other. You can, of course, force children to do things, but they have free minds, after all. They have to be convinced. They have to be shown the value of lib-

erty, they need a great deal of practice at learning to think and judge issues by themselves, and they need firm, benevolent guidance that will show them the practical advantages of exercising their rights, and of respecting the rights of others.

Where does the process begin? With the individual rights of the child. Parents usually drum their children's heads full of their duties and responsibilities, forgetting about the issue of their rights, which should come first. A child cannot develop the virtues that freedom requires if he is never given a chance to exercise his rights—if he is never regarded as an important individual who has the right to learn, to judge, to choose values and to own property. That is, the right to live his life and to pursue his happiness for his own personal benefit.

The child who is allowed to exercise his rights fully, in a reasonable manner (which includes respecting the rights of others), won't have to be convinced that rights are important and should be defended. The child who is dealt with in a fair, reasonable way won't have to be convinced that justice and reason are important in human relations. The child who learns to rely on his own judgment won't have to be convinced that it is foolish to let his happiness be at the mercy of the judgments of others. The child who learns to put his convictions into action and to stand up for them will feel confident that he has a chance of seeing his ideas and values win, and he won't have to be convinced that cowardice is the shortest route to unhappiness and the loss of the things that matter most to him in life.

Unfortunately, it is a rare child who is allowed to exercise his rights fully. Think back to the days of your childhood or take a walk through the

nearest playground. You may be surprised and upset when you think about the implications of what you see. Perhaps you will observe one of the following common events of daily life in America:

--The mother who forces her son to let other children ride his tricycle, while he dissolves in bewildered, angry tears.

--The child who has a temper tantrum because he can't be first up the sliding board ladder, whereupon his mother forces or cajoles the other children to let him go first.

--The mother who, watching her son attack another boy to steal his shovel, shrugs her shoulders and says, "Look at them fighting. Isn't it just like boys, I can't do a thing with him."

--The mother who sneakily throws her son's broken truck in the garbage can, and answers his frantic tears with, "What do you want it for anyway, it's broken. Besides, the red paint's not good for your tummy. Look, Johnny isn't crying. Why can't you be a nice boy like Johnny?"

--The child who asks, "Why can't I have Jimmy's truck? You made me give him my truck yesterday." Reply: "Don't be so selfish."

--The father who pesters his daughter to take part in group games when she would rather play alone.

--The child who comes screaming to his mother because his toy was stolen or he's been beaten on the head for no reason, only to be greeted with, "What's the matter with you, are you some kinda sissy? Go find something else to play with."

--The mother who promises to give her daughter a

ride on the swings, then finds any phony excuse to get out of it.

--The parents who think hostility among children is "normal," or worse yet, "cute."

--The mother who says, "Do it because I say so," or "Do it because Mary Jane is doing it."

--The mother who will not let her child hit back to defend himself.

--The father who will not give his daughter a chance to learn to defend herself, because he always intervenes on her behalf before she has a chance, or whenever she whimpers.

--The mother who does not trust her child after she has explained the rules, who acts as though she suspects his motives or expects him to do the wrong thing.

--The mother who insists that her oldest child devote his play time to taking care of his younger brothers and sisters.

--The mother who takes her toddler son to the park to "enjoy himself," and then won't let him venture more than five feet from the bench she is sitting on.

--The mother who lends her son's toys without asking his permission.

--The mother who brings her child home from the sandbox and hits him for trying to stand up in his stroller; prescribes what friends he will play with, what TV shows he will watch, what books he will read, without trying to discover what his interests are or why he likes one thing

better than another; and who later opens his mail without his consent and does not give him privacy in the bathroom.

--And finally, the parents who try to alleviate their child's pain over the loss of some important friend or toy, with the advice, "Don't worry about it. Nothing's that important. We'll find something else. Now stop crying; life's like that."

You could probably add many more items to this list. Most of these examples share a common attribute: in one way or another, they each illustrate a violation of the rights of children. The parents in these examples give little or no thought to individual rights, individual interests, individual choices, individual property. And most assuredly, they would be the first to resent having to share their automobiles with total strangers, having their job choices prescribed by the government, having their furniture given away or destroyed without their consent. What they fail to do is to treat children with as much respect as they would like others to accord to them.

Is it any wonder that few children grow up with a strong sense of the importance of independent judgment, respect for rights and property, or a strong commitment to personal values and convictions?

They are hardly motivated to if the playground is a place

--where it is considered wrong or silly to care about some idea, person or thing so much that you do not want to compromise it or to give it up to the whims and decisions of others;

--where hostility, force, and emotional self-indulgence gain greater immediate results than reason-

able behavior;

--where rights are neither respected nor protected because the concept of "yours" is more important than "mine";

--where good will, justice, trust, and cooperation cannot be counted on from either children or adults.

Is this the kind of miniature society that will foster the development of future citizens who will uphold and fight for the principles of liberty that our Founding Fathers were willing to die for 185 years ago?

Emphatically no! And the proof is in the sandbox.

The sandboxes of today produce two undesirable types of future citizens. First, there are the little monsters who act like potential dictators or welfare-statists. They act as though they have the right to force others to do their bidding, to live for their benefit or for the benefit of anyone else they choose. They consider personal property theirs for the taking, to use in whatever way they deem fit.

Secondly, there are the frightened children who gradually lose their ability to trust anyone, their desire to be emotionally open about what they value, their hope that they can succeed or achieve what they want to in a world that seems so hostile. When human relations are reduced to a "free-for-all" among unruly animals, the more reasonable child may give up expecting other people to act rationally, out of fear or bewilderment. The little dictators win by default.

What are the alternatives? How can conscientious parents change the sandbox from a world of force

and irrationality where "might makes right" into a world in which a child can feel free to exercise his rights and can learn to respect the rights of others in an atmosphere of good will?

If parents learn the lessons of liberty that playground sandboxes have to teach, the future of America may be quite different.

There are five important lessons that I have learned in dealing with children in and out of the sandbox, which may be helpful to parents, teachers, relatives, etc., who are also concerned about some of the problems I have outlined above. These lessons are all either explicit or implicit in the U.S. Constitution, which contains the principles that govern a society whose citizens enjoy political and economic freedom. I think that parents who put these lessons into practice can help their children to learn the value of liberty.

I. Respect children as individuals. The United States was the first country on earth to build its political and economic system around respect for the individual person's freedom of thought and action. Parents who wish to preserve a free society can begin in the sandbox by helping their children to develop a strong personal sense of individuality.

Discover what makes your child unique, what his personal ideas, interests, feelings, and opinions are. Talk to him on his own level; discuss the events, people, and problems of the sandbox society with him. Consult him about decisions that affect him whenever appropriate and possible, considering the level of his knowledge and understanding. For example, you would not consult a small child about what candidate to vote for, but you can have discussions with him about fair play on the playground, household routines, care of his toys, visits to the

doctor.

Above all, trust him. It is not an accident that the legal systems of free societies presume innocence instead of guilt. Trust implies respect for the individual, as well as a concern for justice. Act as though it would never even occur to you to suspect that your child would willfully do what he knows to be wrong. Trust has a truly beneficent effect: children who enjoy the trust of their parents usually do not make a habit of breaking that trust, just as citizens in a free society do not make a habit of breaking laws. But if children feel that their parents always suspect what they do, they will often build up feelings of resentment and hostility and patterns of spitefully disobedient behavior. They come to regard rules of behavior as a threat, just as the citizens in a dictatorship do.

If you tell Johnny not to throw sand because he may hurt someone else, and then watch him like a hawk suspiciously, he may very well throw it on purpose. He has little incentive to act responsibly when all his actions are under suspicion. Trust encourages a child or an adult to act on his better judgment. What better training for adulthood could a child receive?

Respect for individuality also means respect for an individual person's freedom of thought. Neither an adult nor a child can be forced to value anything. He has to choose it freely. A child should have many areas of individual choice that can be expanded gradually as he learns to make decisions and to choose goals for himself. In the preschool years, let him decide how he wants to spend his free time, what friends he wants to play with, what toys he wants to take to the playground, what books he wants to read, and so forth.

If you let a child make choices in the sandbox, he learns to exercise independent judgment: a skill that living in a free society will require of him when he grows up. Instead of telling him *what* to choose, why not find out what *he* likes, and then help him to learn *how* to choose intelligently among alternatives. When he is alone in a voting booth twenty years from now, you will not have to worry about whether he votes responsibly, if you have taught him how to judge people and issues while he is still very young.

II. Respect children's property rights and make sure that they respect the rights of others. A society, even in a sandbox, without property rights cannot be free and will not foster good will and cooperation. If people feel that they must sacrifice their lives or their property to others, they will not have a benevolent feeling toward those whom they view as potential predators. The preservation of freedom, capitalism, and benevolence in human relationships of all kinds, depends upon a strict protection of property rights. Children have to learn that the protection of everyone's rights, as well as their own, is to their own self-interest.

Children should be allowed to exercise their right of ownership, so that they can learn the importance of property rights. They should be allowed to share their toys if they want to, or to keep them all to themselves if they want to. Children have a right to be consulted before their playthings are given away, loaned, or destroyed. In addition, adults should protect youngsters against marauders and teach them the art of self-defense.

Children frequently assert their property rights vigorously by being very possessive. Unfortunately,

many people seem to regard this as almost pathological. (Probably the ones who regard it as pathological are the same people who think that private property rights in the United States should give way to national economic planning.) Parents might find it helpful to realize that a guiltless preoccupation with "mine" can be used as the touchstone for teaching respect for the rights of others. For example, if your child never develops a strong attachment to his sand bucket and shovel, how will he be able to conceive of the importance of your property to you? As soon as a toddler is old enough to have a fairly clear understanding of the difference between the concepts of "mine" and "yours," he is old enough to learn to respect the rights of others. He can be taught to "take turns," to trade toys with his playmates, etc.

Children will not feel threatened by such training as long as they are free to assert their own rights too. And they will learn an important lesson about freedom: the rights of one person are never a threat to the rights of another in a society which protects the rights of all men. Rights are threatened only when one person oversteps his bounds and blinds himself to the issue of who has a right to what. Children do this sometimes when they have a blinding desire for somebody else's toy and use force to get it. At this point, an adult must step in and firmly let the child know that his desires and his tears do not alter the facts, do not give him the right to someone else's property.

The right of ownership in a free society implies responsibilities which the child must also learn. If he owns a sand bucket, for example, he has the responsibility of taking care of it himself. He does not have the right to expect others to take care of things that belong to him. Parents have to be patient, set a good example, and teach their

child to take care of his toys, to keep track of their whereabouts, and to put them away at the end of the day (remembering, all the while, that this lesson is not learned overnight). In this way, a child gradually learns that valuing something highly requires the effort of positive action, watchfulness, and care, in order to keep it. This is as true of political and economic freedom as it is of a red wagon or a sand pail. Consider what has happened to our economic freedom in the United States since 1933. Somebody wasn't watching.

Another important aspect of learning to respect property rights is the issue of learning the value of property of different kinds. This takes a long time, because a small child has to accumulate a large body of knowledge before he can evaluate the relative values of a sand bucket, a gold watch, a phonograph record, a pair of new party shoes, and a family heirloom. Parents can begin to teach children that a hierarchy of property value exists by asserting their own property rights in the household. In addition, since they are the guardians of their child's own property, they cannot leave him total freedom to use it as he wishes. For example, they cannot let him destroy the twenty dollar bills he got for his birthday, on the premise that the money belongs to him. How will he ever learn that it is valuable unless his parents make an important issue of it? Making an issue of it means helping him to learn by making, and patiently explaining, distinctions between the things that he can use with total freedom and those which he cannot. For example, his good clothes and the expensive phonograph he received as a gift are in a different category from his sand sifter and coloring book.

III. Teach children the practical advantages of cooperation and good will. Frequently, adults try

to force children to cooperate by intimidation or by making them feel guilty about being "selfish." This is nonsense indeed, because (1) cooperation, by definition, cannot be forced, it is voluntary, and (2) if you think of selfishness as doing what is to one's own self-interest, there is nothing that could be more selfish in a free society than voluntary cooperation with others. Life in a free society is exciting and leads to greater happiness precisely because joint effort and cooperation allow us to achieve things we never could achieve alone. Buildings cannot be built, business contracts cannot be fulfilled, laws cannot be passed, juries cannot meet, group games cannot be played--without cooperation.

It usually does not take a parent very long to convince a child (in his own terms) that there are numerous advantages to cooperation--for example, you cannot play a game of catch if you're unwilling to let anyone else touch your softball.

One of the best ways to teach a child to extend good will toward others is to extend it to him yourself. You can usually tell how a child is treated at home by the way he treats other children (or his stuffed animals) on the playground. Children who are treated kindly and patiently are usually not hostile, and do not consider force the normal means of getting what they want.

One word of warning: The child who is used to kindness at home may have difficulty adjusting to the brutal tactics of some children in the sandbox. If you give him lots of moral and verbal support to reassure him that he is right and the bullies are wrong, if you teach him to defend himself (physically and verbally), and if you come to his defense whenever the situation is too difficult for him to handle, he will soon develop a healthy contempt for

brutality and learn to deal with it without being overcome by fear. And, most importantly, he will learn the value of dealing with others in an atmosphere free of force and fear. That is, he will learn one of the crucial values of citizenship in a free country.

IV. Be demanding and discipline firmly. This statement is not a contradiction of my warnings against the use of force, because discipline and force do not mean the same thing. Discipline is a teaching device. It is the voice of reality speaking.

Reality demands something important of each of us--recognition of the facts. The sooner a parent teaches a child what facts should be considered when taking an action, and that he cannot get away with faking what he knows to be untrue, the sooner his child will be encouraged to deal with the facts--the sooner he will realize that truth is an ally, never an enemy.

Contrary to what some people seem to believe, discipline does not consist of a little black book with a long list of rules and regulations to make children be good or to make them "behave themselves." There is no such little black book with columns headed "good" and "bad" by which all of a person's actions can be categorized.

What does exist are general principles of behavior that parents can teach children. For example, a child can be taught to look at what he is doing. Does he know the exact nature of what he is doing? Does he know the meaning and consequences of his action? For example, when he enters the playground, does he know how to play with other children properly, why he should respect their rights, what will happen if he does not? If he takes his playmate's

red ball by force, this action is wrong. Not because a little black book says so, but because reality says so. He has no right to take someone else's property. If disciplinary force is required to make him give the ball back to its owner, the force is retaliatory force. The parent becomes the voice of reality retaliating against an action which tries to pretend that a fact is not a fact--that is, an action which is self-defeating.

Since children do not have enough knowledge to know the nature, meaning, and consequences of all their actions, or to know that evasion of facts is self-defeating in the long run, they need guidance from adults. By means of firm, benevolent discipline parents and teachers can help them to learn what concrete actions to take in order to live happily and independently in the adult world. In addition, they can teach children that law enforcement agencies (like park policemen and school monitors) are indispensable in a free society, because they protect the rights of every citizen and protect the innocent by means of disciplinary action.

Good discipline has a parallel in political life in a free society. The United States has a single document which outlines principles of behavior in a free society--the U.S. Constitution. In addition, these principles are spelled out more concretely in statutes passed by Congress. Although, since the New Deal, administrative regulatory agencies have multiplied in Washington, the laws of the United States are still essentially prohibitive. Prohibitive laws give a wide latitude of choice because, in effect, they say, "You can do anything but X." And disciplinary action does not take place until X action has been committed.

Contrast this to a Hitler-like fascist state which is maintained by regulatory law. Almost every as-

pect of political, economic and even personal life is regulated. Indeed, the list of regulations would fill a big black book. It is assumed that in order for men to live and produce, someone has to tell them what to do, to make them "behave themselves." The enforcers (like some parents), end up enslaving themselves, because large-scale regulation requires constant policing. And the enforcers find out, if they care to look, that their schemes work only minimally, because men will not continue to live and work with any vigor without personal rewards, incentives or the ability to choose.

Parents have to choose between a discipline which allows children freedom of choice and acts as a guide to action, and discipline which assumes that they are zombies who need a specific rule for every moment of the day. (We are all familiar with the mothers, and the senators, who seem to stay up late at night dreaming up regulations.)

Regulatory discipline does not work with children for the same reasons that it does not work in the adult world. You can produce a "well-behaved" child in a very strict home or boarding school, but what happens when he leaves and the rules are gone? Usually, he cannot function well at all, because he has never developed his capacity to make sensible judgments and to choose among alternatives. Freedom may seem like an actual threat to him because he feels frightened and out of control when he has to choose. Good discipline recognizes that children need practice at being free in order to live successfully in a free country.

Good discipline not only allows the child greater and greater freedom as he grows older; it also gives parents much more freedom. They do not have to be secret policemen on duty every second to see

that Junior is obeying a multitude of rules. They can trust him, because he is gradually learning self-discipline.

What kinds of disciplinary measures are necessary, fair, and appropriate? That depends upon the age of the child. Very young children need many more regulations than elementary school children, because they haven't acquired the knowledge to know how to make choices. In the beginning, discipline should be very clear-cut, spelled out in simple black and white terms. That is all a toddler can understand, and he will feel either confused or insecure if he does not know exactly what is expected of him. But as soon as he is old enough to make choices by himself, a child should be allowed more freedom so that he can learn to judge between alternatives.

Here are a few guidelines I have learned from experience.

--Discipline consistently and, above all, fairly. Children are very sensitive to the issue of justice, and they have little respect for the adult who "lets them get away with" misbehavior.

--Try to fit the punishment to the crime, as soon as the crime occurs, if possible. For example, if a child insists upon stealing everyone' toys in the sandbox (after he knows better), he might be taken home immediately and not allowed to go back to the sandbox for a few days.

--Discipline calmly, so that the child understands that it is reality he has to answer to, not an emotional outburst. Good discipline is not a personal vendetta of the "Do-it-because-I-say-so" variety.

--Never make threats that you are not able or willing to carry out.

--Be demanding, not in a harsh way, but in a kind way. Let your child know the rules of the game. Assert your own rights firmly. Indicate that you are demanding a great deal because you know he is the kind of top-notch person who can live up to a high standard. Children respond to this kind of encouragement by doubling their efforts. When they succeed, they usually feel very grown up and have a renewed respect for you. This respect can develop naturally at a later date into respect for law enforcement agencies in adult society.

--Accompany disciplinary actions with explanations on the spot, if possible. This does not mean that an adult should substitute explanations for action or "reason" with a child who insists on having a temper tantrum. It means that a child should always know why he is expected to do something. In this way, he can learn how to judge better what to do when he is on his own.

What about corporal punishment? I am unequivocally opposed to inflicting pain on anyone as a means of teaching him anything. Of course, a parent has to use physical means on occasion when disciplining or restraining a child, but physical restraint is not the same as physical pain. Besides, what has a child learned when he is punished by the pain of a slap, which vanishes in a few moments? In fact, there is a danger that he will assume something that will have a bad effect upon his adult life: that fear and force are appropriate when dealing with other people.

V. Explain, explain, explain. A child has a mind and he has to learn to use it. He should not be forced to do things that he does not understand the

nature, meaning, importance, or benefit or danger of. He deserves explanations and answers to questions. In common sense terms, I mean that parents should take their role as teachers seriously.

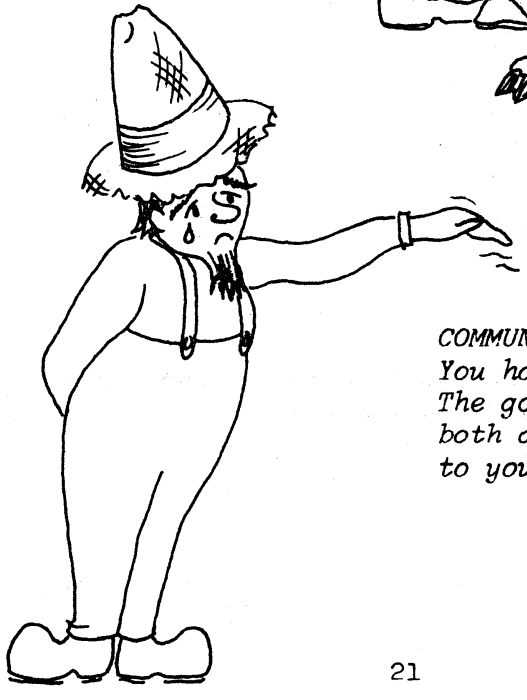
These five lessons give an indication of the types of things parents can do to help their children develop independent judgment and to understand the value of integrity and moral courage. Of course, there is no guarantee that a child will take the lessons to heart. He may choose to indulge his whims. But at least parents can encourage him to rely on himself and to develop into a mature adult citizen, by showing him the practical benefits of being reasonable and of recognizing rights, and by never letting him profit from being cowardly, lazy, bullying, whining, or dishonest.

The lessons learned in the sandbox can pave the way to success when today's children reach the ballot box, the jury box, and the petty cash box. The playgrounds of yesteryear produced many of the collectivists of today. Perhaps the sandbox society I suggest for today will give birth to statesmen and intellectuals who will strive to preserve and restore freedom, particularly economic freedom, in the years to come.

--Joyce F. Jones

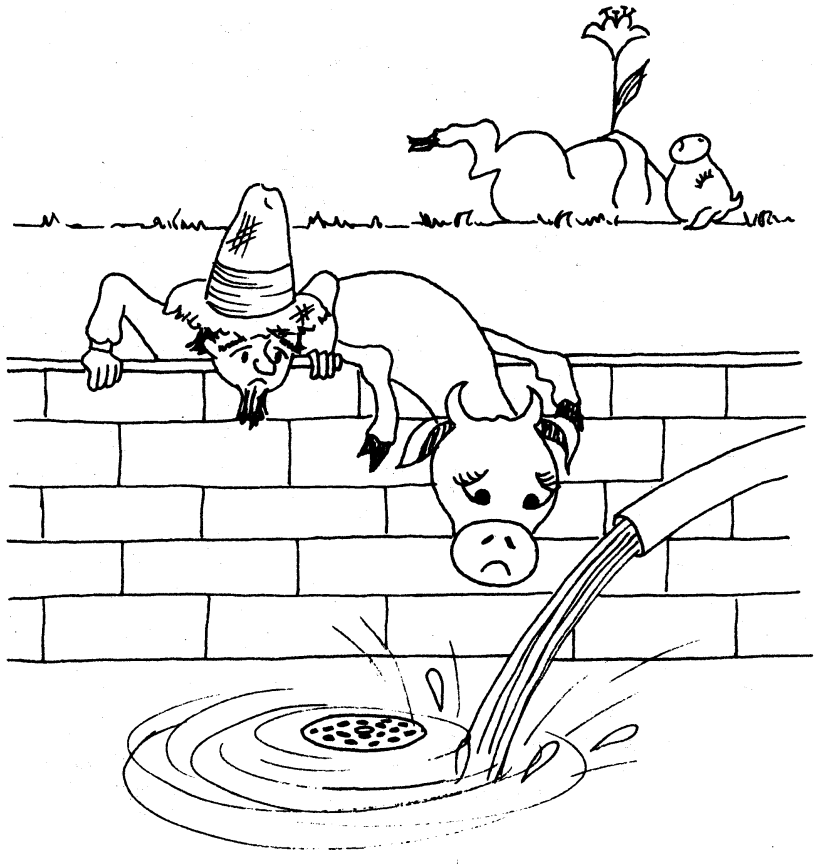
PERSUASION
"Political Philosophy"

SOCIALISM:
You have two cows.
The government takes one and gives it to your neighbor.



COMMUNISM:
You have two cows.
The government takes both and gives one to your neighbor.

FASCISM:
You have two cows. The government takes both and sells you the milk.



NEW DEALISM:
You have two cows. The government takes both, shoots one, milks the other, and throws the milk away.

CAPITALISM:
You have two cows. You sell one and buy a bull.