

*The classical liberals and the conservative tradition.*

## *A Conservative Case for Freedom*

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THERE IS widespread agreement nowadays on the fact that, somewhere along the way, Western society has taken a wrong turning—that it has strayed from the values which once made it strong and informed it with purpose. Unfortunately, there is considerably less agreement as to what, exactly those values are.

Those who have been most vocal in decrying our fallen state have usually been identified as “conservatives”—a term

which conceals a number of deep and inhibiting disagreements. In the case of anything so vast and disorderly as modern error, it is only natural that there should be some confusion as to what is the matter. And while the question is difficult and philosophical, it is of more than academic interest; for until we have some kind of agreed analysis, those concerned to correct things can hardly marshal the resources necessary for the job.

The confusion is greatly increased by the forces which error has thrust into power. Understandably enough, the ruling collectivists and "liberals," so called, have tried to conjure the protest movement out of existence. A whole school of literature has been developed attempting to define present-day conservatism either as a revenant classical liberalism, or else as a form of mental disorder. In either case, the point is to dispose of it as something too silly to be of much account. The more damaging of these criticisms, because the one more nearly containing a suggestion of truth, is the identification with classical liberalism. All those objecting to the growing dominance of government and the contraction of individual freedom are lumped together as descendants of Spencer and Sumner, and thus, presumably, disposed of. While labeling someone a classical liberal is not necessarily an insult, it must be pointed out that today's conservatives, while opponents of statism, are generally not Manchesterians. There are, to be sure, some classical liberals in the conservative camp, just as there seem to be some Metternichian strong men. Yet there are still other conservatives who are neither statist nor Manchesterians; and it is this three-way babel of ideas, now and again punctuated by a helpful shout from the far left, which has sundered conservative effort and diffused its strength.

The fundamental disagreement occurs over the problem of man and his nature: specifically, whether the imperatives of individual freedom can be reconciled with the Christian conception of the individual as flawed in mind and will, with its demand for individual subordination to an objective, non-secular order. Critics of the protest movement delight in pointing to what they consider an insoluble dilemma. They are joined by sectarians within the movement itself, urging on the one hand that

we abandon our insistence on individual freedom, on the other that we give up our Christianized view of man. The two, we are repeatedly informed, are simply not compatible. For the purposes of this essay, I shall call those who choose the first alternative "authoritarians," those who choose the second "libertarians."\*

The authoritarian believes in the objective order, and is generally ready to limit individual freedom to follow its prescriptions. He prefers a hierarchical to a fluid society, conceiving some men as destined to rule, others to obey—all ordained by the objective order. The libertarian finds the idea of such an immobile society repugnant, and rejects the principles which have been used to sanction it. It is the argument of this essay that both positions rest on a form of illicit conversion—that they have not properly related first principles and conclusions. Patient inquiry will disclose, I think, that affirmation of a transcendent order is not only compatible with individual autonomy, but the condition of it; and that a skeptical view of man's nature not only permits political liberty, but demands it.

The problem can best be examined if we divide it in two: first, the question of

\*I want to emphasize that my use of the word "libertarian" signifies the chemically pure form of classical liberalism, with all of its metaphysical implications. The term is sometimes used in a different sense, to identify those who insist on limited government and political freedom, without implying acceptance of the anti-religious philosophy here associated with it. I have used the authoritarian-conservative-libertarian terminology in order to establish a recognizable continuum of ideas, and intend no derogation of "libertarians" of the second sort. Indeed, I believe many of the people who call themselves "libertarians" would accept the position I describe as "conservative"—with its dual emphasis on freedom and moral authority. To the extent they do, I trust my terminology will not obscure the fact that the argument of this essay is not an attack on such "libertarians," but a vindication of them.

freedom as related to the existence of objective value; second, the question of freedom as related to the nature of man. The "libertarian," or "classical liberal," characteristically denies the existence of a God-centered moral order, to which man should subordinate his will and reason. Alleging human freedom as the single moral imperative, he otherwise is a thoroughgoing relativist, pragmatist and materialist. He puts considerable emphasis on economics. Man and his satisfactions, the libertarian maintains, are themselves the source of value—and other values cannot be imposed from without. Because the free economy best serves man, and best supplies his material needs, it is moral. It works.

There seem to be a number of reasons for libertarian devotion to these views. One no doubt is that some present-day libertarians are genuine descendants of Spencer and Sumner, and proceed—logically, as they believe—from relativist premises to a vindication of freedom. But I believe the more common occurrence is that other considerations, largely unspoken, incline the libertarian to his particular brand of relativism. I think many attacks on the idea of a transcendent order can be traced to fears about the uses to which any particular affirmation of truth may be put. The libertarian suspects that commitment to this or that ethical judgment will imply the need for having it enforced by the political authorities. Additionally, there seems to be considerable confusion between *value*, as received from tradition and the counsels of religious teaching, and *conformity*, imposed by the pressures of the group. The two may of course coincide—specifically, when group pressures aim at enforcing traditional value. But the fact that they may appear in conjunction does not mean they are the same; and in a time of triumphant revolution, inability

to make the distinction constitutes failure at the most elementary level of analysis.

The problem is akin to that created by obscurantists of the "new conservative" variety, who tell us that since conservatives are opposed to change, they should be in favor of the New Deal. The argument empties conservatism of all value content, and makes it simply a matter of technique. But conservatives who wish to conserve value generally have some particular value in mind, and must oppose any particular status quo which denies it. The libertarian falls into the converse error. Because he is opposed to the status quo of New Dealism, he determines that he must not be a conservative, and battles those who so call themselves. It is hard to believe anyone interested in conserving historic American institutions could become reconciled to the patchwork collectivism of the last 25 years. The conformity of statism represents a radical break with American tradition; those who wish to affirm the values embodied in the tradition must perforce be nonconformists and rebels, ready to brave the censure of the group. Moreover, it is only if they are motivated by deeply cherished values that they can manage to do so. So far are "value" and "conformity" from being identical that the second can rise to its current distasteful height only when the first declines. A man without the interior armor of value has no defense against the pressures of his society. It is precisely the loss of value which has turned the "inner-directed" citizen of the 19th-century America into the "other-directed" automaton of today.

Man, Ortega wrote, "is a being forced by his nature to seek some higher authority. If he succeeds in finding it of himself, he is a superior man; if not, he is a mass-man, and must receive it from his superiors." To exist in community, men must harmonize their desires; some kind of gen-

eral equilibrium has to prevail. Men who lose the "inner check," as Babbitt called it, must therefore submit to an outer one; they become mass men, ruled by their "superiors."

The erosion of value is doubly destructive. As it promotes statism by creating the need for an external force to order conflicting desires, it simultaneously weakens the individual's ability to withstand the state. Men without values are more than willing to trade their freedom for material benefits. That the loss of moral constraint invites the rule of power is surely one of the best-established facts of 20th-century history. Indeed, a number of quite unconservative witnesses have pointed out that the vigor of civilization is dependent on people who are guided by some internalized system of value, and who are thus capable of initiative and self-reliant behavior. This is the burden of David Riesman's celebrated study, *The Lonely Crowd* (in which the terms "inner-directed" and "other-directed" were coined), and the message of such critics of modern society as Pitirim Sorokin, William H. Whyte, and Professor Richard LaPiere.

The authoritarian, like the libertarian, believes that value and enforcement go hand in hand; unlike the libertarian, however, he accepts both. He merely wants to be the person doing the enforcing. The conservative, as I conceive him, rejects the common analysis. While he does not share the authoritarian's readiness to coerce his fellow men into virtue, neither does he share the libertarian's commitment to freedom at virtue's expense. The conservative believes man should be free; he does not believe being free is the end of human existence. He maintains that man exists to form his life in consonance with the objective order, to choose the Good. But "choice" of the Good can take place only in circumstances favoring volition. Free-

dom is thus the political context of moral decision; it is the modality within which the human mind can search out moral absolutes. In the conservative view, then, right choice is the terminal value; freedom an instrumental and therefore subsidiary value.

To the conservative, economic and political freedom per se are not "moral"; only willed human actions have moral content, and freedom dictates no particular actions. A freely acting man may or may not be moral, depending on what he does. But while freedom is morally neutral, the possible alternatives, i.e., varying forms of coercion, are not. By their nature, all coercive systems require certain actions which we hold immoral: the arbitrary exercise of power over men by other men. The free economy permits morality, but does not guarantee it; the coerced economy guarantees immorality. This formulation may prove distasteful to authoritarians accustomed to identifying all defenders of economic freedom as Manchesterians. Yet I can conceive of no other which can maintain the conditions of moral choice. It may prove equally distasteful to libertarians, accustomed to seeing all "true believers" as enemies of liberty. Yet I can conceive of no other that will insure the sanctity of freedom. If there is no value system with which we may rebuke the pretensions of despots, what is to prevent the rule of force in the world? If there are no objective standards of right and wrong, why object to tyranny?

The last argument needs to be taken a step further. The Manchesterians allege that man's self-interest, which flourishes under a regime of freedom, is sufficient sanction to keep liberty intact. But that calculus of desires is too subtle for most of mankind. It is the immemorial habit of man to be unable to see his long-term interest when a short-term one looms before

him. When he thinks he can achieve an immediate benefit, he is willing to give up some of his freedom to obtain it. Surely the entire trend of modern politics has demonstrated this point with disturbing finality. Only when there is widespread adherence to a consensus of value, and only when that value is one which sanctions the continuance of freedom, can freedom endure. As freedom is the condition of value, so is value the guarantor of freedom.

WHEN WE have examined the question of value to determine whether or not freedom is desirable, we must turn to the problem of man's nature to decide what political arrangements offer the best promise of sustaining it. Metaphysically, freedom is the context of choice—the ground of decision where one seeks to break through to transcendence. Politically, it is a physical condition existing between and among men. In conventional discourse, "freedom" usually means the absence of constraint by one man upon another. Since some form of constraint is necessary to let men live together, the degree to which it can be relaxed, and the conflict of what are variously defined as "freedoms," are problems for which there are almost as many answers as there are theorists.

But whatever our difficulties in defining it, freedom is obviously a product of the way men behave toward one another. If we want to maximize freedom, we can begin to do so only after examining the motives of human behavior; and the first task in the pursuit of political freedom is therefore to reach a reasoned position about the nature of man.

Again, there is a division of opinion on the right. The "libertarian," or classical liberal, affirms the natural goodness, or—in the more scientific forms—the non-evil, of human nature. He views gov-

ernment as the source of evil, the unfettered individual as the source of good. He has considerable faith in "progress" as the natural creation of free men, and tends to believe that material success and moral virtue are closely akin, if not identical. For all of these reasons, he concludes that government should let people alone to employ their natural goodness. In his extreme form, the modern-day libertarian is a philosophical anarchist—a free-enterprise Utopian.

The authoritarian holds precisely the opposite view. He believes people in their natural state are not good, but evil. Viewing human will as perverse and human reason as limited, he does not believe at all in automatic "progress." He does not accept the Darwinian equation of morality and economic prosperity, with its subordination of value to the observable relation of forces. Like Henry Adams, he thinks things more probably than not are tending to unravel—which is only to be expected if the natural direction of human choice is downward. For all these reasons, the authoritarian believes in strong government. Because man is feckless, he needs aristocratic guidance to force him to be good.

The conservative, again, believes the two schools have reached their positions through a shared mistake in analysis; they fail to relate the question of man's nature to the problem of government. Concretely, they fail to see that government cannot be treated as something apart from "men"—in the one case as the source of evil, in the other as the source of moral guidance. For what is government, after all, but men in the exercise of power? In the case of the libertarian, if men are naturally good, whence comes the evil of government? In the case of the authoritarian, if men are fundamentally evil, how

does government become a force for virtue?

The conservative agrees with the authoritarian that men are not to be trusted, and his constant concern is to restrain the destructive tendencies he discerns in a fallen humanity. But he does not agree that such a judgment means man should be ruled by an aristocracy. For if men are evil, then potential aristocrats are evil too—and no man, logically, can be said to have a commission to coerce another. “Absolute monarchs,” in Locke’s phrase, “are but men”—and as such heirs to the same weaknesses of the human kind as are their subjects. Moreover, their ability to inflict evil on others obviously increases with the amount of power they wield. The conservative wants political freedom precisely because he fears the fundamental nature of man.

I concede there is little difference between what I call the “conservative” philosophy on this point and the views of a number of men sometimes thought of as “classical liberals,”—Adam Smith, Lord Acton, de Tocqueville. The position of this “liberal” school, if such it be, is best suggested by F. A. Hayek’s characterization of himself as an “old-fashioned Whig.” Such “liberals” fear government because they fear man—and on the technical point of the relation between man’s nature and the kind of government appropriate to him are indistinguishable from the conservatives.

Hayek divides the people we think of as “classical liberals” into two camps—the “true” and the “false” individualists. “True” individualism may or may not come coupled with the deeper moral affirmations of the conservative position, but it is a far cry from the alternately sentimental and mechanistic notions about man which convert themselves so easily to the uses of collectivism.

“The cultivated man,” said Renan in a celebrated flight of false individualism,

“has only to follow the delicious incline of his inner impulses.” This was the kind of fatuous self-love which prompted Jacob Burckhardt to reflect that mankind was losing its conception of the need for external standards—“whereupon, of course, we periodically fall victims to sheer power.” The “true” individualist sides not with Renan but with Burckhardt. His chief concern in seeking freedom is not to liberate the “natural goodness” of man, but to localize as much as possible man’s tendencies toward evil. “It would scarcely be too much to claim,” Hayek says of Adam Smith, “that the main merit of the individualism which he and his contemporaries advocated is that it is a system under which bad men can do the least harm.”

The mutual regard that existed between Smith and Edmund Burke is, of course, a matter of record. The similarity of their ideas suggests that, on the point of fearing man and his behavior in power, the camps of “true” individualism and “conservatism” are indeed one; and the rapprochement suggests, in turn; that a view of freedom as compatible with mistrust of human nature is recommended by a broad tradition as well as by the homely counsel of clear thought.

The conservative’s task, then, is to insure that enough governmental authority exists to suppress criminal outcroppings of human weakness, but at the same time to insure that no man, or group of men, is vested with too much political power. It has proved, down the centuries, to be quite a task. There is very little difficulty in establishing either the authoritarian’s ideal of a strong government, or the libertarian’s contrary ideal of complete (if therefore temporary) freedom. The great problem is to set up a system of “free government,” providing both order and freedom; and, as Burke said, “to temper together these opposite elements of liberty and restraint in

one consistent work requires much thought, deep reflection, a sagacious, powerful and combining mind.”

This was, as it happened, the very problem which preoccupied the founders of the American nation, and the problem which achieved its highest resolution in the compact on which the United States was based. The dilemma of government, as our Constitution-makers saw it, was to restrain power in the very act by which it was granted: to establish an authority which could be used for certain limited purposes, but for those only; which would be hedged about by alternative centers of decision, jealous of their own prerogatives, and by constitutional proscription. The object was for power to be so diffused and equilibrated that each source of authority would limit and restrain another, while having sufficient strength to perform the tasks appropriate to it.

In a word, the model answer to the dilemma of “free government” is the American Constitution—founded in the counterpoise of interests of colonial North America, and fused in the powerful, sagacious, and combining mind of James Madison. It is

noteworthy that neither the “authoritarian” ideas of Hamilton nor the “libertarian” notions of Jefferson dominated the Constitution. Instead, the great conceptual balance struck by Madison prevailed in that document, and, for a time, in the nation. “The great desideratum of government,” Madison said, “is such a modification of sovereignty as will render it sufficiently neutral between the different interests and factions, to control one part of the country from invading the rights of another, and at the same time sufficiently controlled itself, from setting up an interest adverse to that of the whole society.”

Being itself a product of fallible men, and administered by others still more fallible, the Constitution has of course achieved less than perfection. But it has maintained a shifting equilibrium, and it is testimony to the founders’ intentions that they are even today the center about which our political controversies revolve. Certainly, whatever its imperfections and whatever its current ravaged condition, the American Constitution has proved that the practice of “conservatism,” beginning from a profound mistrust of man, and of men panoplied as the state, can well serve the ends of freedom.