

Traditionalism and Libertarianism: Two Views

DANTE GERMINO

AT THE OUTSET, let me say that originally I intended to give only my own thoughts on the relationship between traditionalism and libertarianism. Inasmuch as I concluded that the two were *philosophically* incompatible (what happens practically is beyond my domain as a political theorist), my argument seemed to be rather depressing. I, therefore, changed my plan and after stating my own understanding of the subject, will consider what I take to be the implications of William F. Buckley, Jr.'s ideas on the subject. Such is Mr. Buckley's prominence as a conservative thinker, that I am sure no justification for selecting him is required.

In his classic work *Man and His Government*, Carl J. Friedrich wrote that tradition is the name we give to the process wherein "aspirational images" are transmitted from one generation to another. In a society open to tradition these images come to have authoritative status. One can think of the Confucian Mandarin, or the Balinese hero in the *wayang kulit*, or the Aristotelian ideal of the *spoudaios*, or the English gentleman. These aspirational images are handed down and modified from generation to generation through formal and informal means. The work of many minds and many generations, tradition is the antithesis of what we know today as "ideology." Ideology has been called an instant, plastic myth. Whereas a tradition is far richer, deeper, and more nuanced than any abridgment of it can be, ideology is *only* the abridgment of what was a reductionist experience of reality in the first place. Although tradition can be rationally explicated, it is ultimately something felt in one's bones.

Traditionalists are concerned with roots,

with origins. Origins are remote. Pressing on beyond the origins of his country, the traditionalist ponders the origin of his civilization. He then finds, with Eric Voegelin, that his civilization originates in a religiousness, and that this religiousness in turn is related to—even if it is a traumatic break from—the religiousness of ancient man. Eventually, the traditionalist faces existentially the problem of man's origin *qua* man. He is astonished at finding himself to be a member of a multitude of communities in space of time, all of them embraced by a community which transcends space and time: the open society, or the universal community of the spirit under God. He discovers himself and his fellows to be uniquely the creatures conscious of divine presence, capable of participating through their own reason in the divine reason and of hearing God speak His word.

By this time, the traditionalist has noticed something striking: he is utterly out of tune with the culture in which he lives. This culture, called "modernity," is grounded on the assumption that man is the creator of his own destiny. From Pico della Mirandola onwards, the modernist has assumed that the innerworldly human being, divorced from tradition, is the center and measure of meaning.

Modernism is a heady doctrine which takes many forms. Some forms are collectivist, some are individualist, some attempt a synthesis of individualism and collectivism. What distinguishes all forms of modernism is their innerworldliness. Modernist man is activist man, bent on transforming the environment. Where the traditionalist sees himself as participating in a mystery, the modernist sees himself as

acting on a field of forces to be mastered or subjugated. The traditionalist is open to transcendence, to poetry; the modernist tends to look at all reality as an engineering project. His language is full of talk about "problem-solving," blueprints, social contracts, and the like.

Libertarianism is a term with particular meaning in the American context. The names of Ayn Rand, Murray Rothbard, Robert Nozick, and (most recently) Ed Clark, come readily to mind. Despite their differences, libertarians have in common the desire to be left alone. Society for them is an abstraction. The individual, divorced from history (another name for tradition), is the only reality. Unfettered competition for worldly recognition and material success is the norm. A libertarian society would be a society run by those who are good at competing; *i.e.*, by one particular character type. Libertarianism is not to be confused with anarchism; in a way, Hobbes was the father of all libertarianism, if one interprets him aright (see *Leviathan*, Chapter 21).

Such a summary description of libertarianism may be questioned at various points. In particular, it is open to objection for having stressed economic libertarianism to the neglect of the social (or anti-social) libertarian. The latter appears to be more concerned with privacy than with achievement. Of course, liberty may be used in different ways: theoretically, there is no reason why libertarians can't be radical egalitarians and collectivists, if they want to contract with other like-minded individuals. I argue, however, that the logic of libertarianism is irremediably competitive and individualistic, and that a genuine libertarian would speedily contract out of an egalitarian commune. Libertarians on social issues are more appropriately classified as radicals.

To repeat: it seems to me impossible on philosophical grounds to bring together traditionalism and libertarianism as I understand them. They are two disparate frames of mind: one is romantic, the other rationalist; one acknowledges the substantive reality of the historical and social

realms, the other's chief preoccupation is freeing the individual from what are perceived to be abstract claims and limitations. And so one could go on down the list of antitheses.

Cardinal Manning once observed that all political differences are at bottom theological in nature. This overstatement expresses a great deal of truth relevant to the issue at hand. Traditionalists accept what Plato called the "Between" of human life. They do not pretend to have created or to "own" themselves. As the Psalmist sings, "It is He that hath made us and not we ourselves."

What about the libertarian? To take one extreme example of libertarian thinking, Murray Rothbard has noted that for the libertarian the "nub" of the abortion issue is the "absolute right of every person, and hence every woman, to the ownership of her own body." Abortion is not killing, he declares, no matter when human life begins, because "no being has a right to live, unbidden, as a parasite within or upon some person's body." [Murray Rothbard, *For a New Liberty* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 121.

While traditionalists today continue to attempt to fathom the mystery of when human life begins, they are all agreed on the principle of the sanctity of life. They experience themselves and each member of the human family as made in the image of God. Thus, the sanctity of human life is an inviolable principle. The idea that the fetus is simply a "parasite" on the body of a woman and that it may legitimately be expelled at any time (presumably even up to the moment of birth) by any mother who finds it no longer convenient to carry it around is certainly not widely entertained by libertarians themselves. It is not even consistent with Rothbard's own principle of natural rights. How did Rothbard arrive at such a bizarre conclusion? Apparently by driving John Locke's abstract notion of the individual as having "ownership" over himself or herself to its ultimate ideological conclusion. Why not go a step or two further, however, and declare all so-called human beings who may be considered

“parasites” on those supporting them—whether they be young, old, or infirm—to be expendable? Herbert Spencer, whom Mr. Rothbard cites with such favor in his writings, certainly did not shrink from such a conclusion with his ominous call for “survival of the fittest.”

I do not wish at all to imply that Mr. Rothbard’s conclusions are typical of libertarians in general. What I propose to do now is to make a fresh start in considering the question of the core, or essence, of both traditionalism and libertarianism.

It is testimony to the power of ideology in our time that tradition has a terrible name: it is supposed to be a body of static rules and dogmas from which men and women are to be liberated by modern “progress.” The person whose education and character formation have been ruined by ideology can never distinguish between the core and the periphery of a tradition, between its spiritual insight and its sociomorphic deformation. Therefore, for the ideologue, it is easy, say, to dismiss Confucianism because it is somehow (whether wrongly or not does not matter) associated with the practice of binding women’s feet.

Properly understood, I would call “traditionalism” a disposition of mind and spirit open to the reality of mankind as a universal community under God. Traditionalism is not an ideology of the “upper class.” It is not, say, the private preserve of people who dress up in Pink Coats to go fox-hunting in Virginia.

Now what about libertarianism? Having recently re-read George Nash’s chapter on “The Revolt of the Libertarians” in his *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America* (Basic Books, 1976), I am reminded that this term encompasses a multitude of thinkers of all sorts of tendencies. Rather than pretend to give an accurate overview of the various currents in the libertarian “movement,” I wish to stress what I hold to be the philosophical implications of a consistent libertarian position.

The basis of any consistent libertarianism is the social contract metaphor. Paraphrasing Marx, one may say that

Hobbes is the father of all libertarians. From any traditionalist perspective, the social contract analogy presents a totally wrong and completely misleading image of man and society. It is impossible to jump over the Rhodes of history. The human being is not an atom divorced and abstracted from his community and his past. Nor is politics a matter of bargaining for who gets what, when, and how. For the traditionalist, a genuine community is bound together by a sense of transcendent purpose. For the traditionalist, the degree of dissolution in a community is relative to the prominence of social contract language in its public life.

I could go on about the differences between the two strands of thought. Suffice it to say however, that the individual *person* (Maritain and Berdayev’s distinction between “person” and “individual” is helpful here) is the *terminus a quo* of a properly conceived traditionalism. On that point—the uniqueness, dignity, and worth of the individual—there is no difference between the two approaches. The difficulty is that libertarianism does not proceed from the starting point of the primacy of the person to sketch in a theory of the good society based on a range of aspirational images of the good person. Instead, one is left with the bottomless well of “privacy” into which in principle any brick may be thrown without hearing an echoing effect for anyone else. However unintentionally, the libertarian image of society—and it is a *society*, not a community—is one of a collection of fiercely competing, self-serving, acquisitive individuals.

It is all well and good for the libertarian to reply that every individual is different and that each individual is free to become a mystic, monk, poet, prophet, philanthropist, or whatever. To the traditionalist, such a reply will be unconvincing, because people being what they are, few of them will go “beyond the dreams of avarice” unless moved to do so by aspirational images of the good person which transcend the Hobbesian power seeker. In a libertarian society, the great mass of ordinary materialists will be even more

materialistic than they would be otherwise.

The traditionalist holds with Plato that man is a God-seeker rather than a power-seeker. Or better, that in the good person the part of the psyche capable of responding to the pull of the golden cord of logos is ultimately stronger than that part of the soul that would follow the counterpull (the iron cord) of the earthly passions. However frequently we deviate from the divine measure and fall into the muck of the cave, the reality of the fulfilled life is there to call us to service to others and to self-transcendence.

To me, the unbridgeable chasm that separates traditionalism and libertarianism has to do with nothing less than competing claims as to the constitution, the accent, the requirements of reality. One cannot compromise such diverse readings of reality.

Traditionalism regards the hustling, acquisitive, competitive individual lauded by libertarianism as someone destined to let life slip through his hands. The traditionalist knows the temptations of greed, lust for power, hedonism and all the rest of the innerworldly attractions as well as anyone; what he refuses to do is give those temptations the stamp of legitimacy. Plato's cave allegory, Jeremiah's report of Yahweh's condemnation of "seeking great things for yourself," and Jesus' admonition against gaining the whole world yet losing one's soul, are all paradigmatic, authoritative messages for the traditionalist. Although he acknowledges both our innerworldly responsibilities and our delight in God's creation, the traditionalist recognizes the existential obligation to follow Moses in the exodus from the Sheol of civilizational pride.

An Alternative Interpretation:
William F. Buckley, Jr.

I NOW WISH TO turn to what I perceive to be the interpretation of traditionalism and libertarianism by William F. Buckley, Jr. I am here drawing on the writings which reveal most clearly his theoretical depth; these are principally his reader *American*

Conservative Thought in the Twentieth Century, his quasi-autobiography *Cruising Speed*, and his series of lectures, *Four Reforms*. I should also add that, even though I have in no way shared this paper with him, I will be drawing on a decade's friendly correspondence and conversation as background.

To begin with, Buckley recognizes both traditionalism and libertarianism empirically to be strands of American conservative thought. His reader on conservative thought contains selections ranging from Albert Jay Nock on the one hand to Russell Kirk on the other. It is also evident from his Introduction to this volume that Buckley regards certain thinkers who are often associated with the two terms as having "excluded themselves" from membership in the conservative community. (William F. Buckley, Jr., *American Conservative Thought in the Twentieth Century*, Introduction).

Where, however, would Buckley himself have conservatism stand, if he had his 'druthers? It would appear to me that he would probably align it under the banners of something he has called "a libertarianism of this world."

Whether fairly or unfairly, today's libertarianism has been described—most recently by Christopher Lasch—as a variant of the cult of self-indulgence appropriate to the "age of narcissism." Buckley's "libertarianism" is poles removed from such an attitude. His attacks upon "narcissistic" attitudes are frequent and vehement; if anything, there is a Ciceronian streak in Buckley. His commitment to Western civilization and to the American polity is such that he could never agree with the abstract, ahistorical, atomistic view of man so evident in the writings of a Robert Nozick or a Murray Rothbard. (As for Ayn Rand, Buckley attacked her ideas in his brilliant introduction to his reader on conservatism: Randian man, he wrote, is a "relentless self-server who lives for himself and for absolutely no one else." He also condemned Rand's implacable, unyielding tone, which bears the mark of ideological fanaticism.

In his book, *Four Reforms*, Buckley tells us that his aim is to "free up constricting molds and to flush out accretions of government, so as to induce a greater freedom of movement. Such freedom should encourage spontaneity, innovation, and individuation." (*Four Reforms*, p. 9) Let it be noted that the text refers to eliminating "accretions" of government. There is no philo-anarchistic hatred of government as such in Buckley's political thought. Government may legitimately perform functions going significantly beyond those of the minimal state. Thus, he insists that "categorical opposition to welfare of any kind is not a part of the philosophical equipment of the libertarians of this world." (p. 21)

Buckley's phrase "libertarianism of this world" needs to be understood on two levels. The more obvious meaning is pragmatic: the libertarian paradigm evoking a society of mature, responsible, self-sufficient individuals, in practice must be diluted because of the empirical fact that significant numbers of people in modern society lack either the will or the way or both to fashion for themselves a humane existence. (Yes, there is a "natural aristocracy.") Furthermore, compromises must be struck with those portions of society who see themselves as benefitting from income redistribution programs if libertarians may acquire and retain political power in our constitutional democracy.

There is, however, a deeper sense in which Buckley intends the phrase "of this world"; if his differences with the state of nature-social contract-nightwatchman-state libertarians were confined to the pragmatic adjustments necessary to get ahead in American politics, Buckley would scarcely inveigh so vigorously against some libertarians as he has done. Rather, I suggest that he means the phrase "of this world" to have *philosophical* significance: "this world" means precisely this "intractable" world—in other words, the human condition, full of inexplicable suffering, confusion, miscalculation, good, evil, violence, poetry, music, art, street warfare, garbage, fanaticism, and on down the list

of phenomena. "This world," furthermore, is not the whole of reality; it stands in relation to eternity. "This world" stands for what is time-bound in our experience of reality. As the *saeculum*, it opens out into ultimate, transcendent reality. Being "worldly" in the philosophical sense implies a concurrent awareness of the other-worldliness in terms of which the worldliness of the world may be evaluated in proper perspective.

Buckley's *philosophical* worldliness, a worldliness open to experiences of transcendent reality, leads him to have a profound distrust of rationalistic, doctrinaire solutions, of course, but beyond that it permits him to understand the dangers of the peculiarly modern phenomenon known as ideology. There will be no "ideological home runs," he declares, because the world of the *saeculum* is not ultimate. It is folly to pursue infinite satisfaction in a finite dimension of reality. Eric Voegelin was right: don't try to immanentize the eschaton. Knowledge of innerworldly incompleteness and intractability helps to produce the air of detachment and serenity in Buckley's writing.

For Buckley, reason is existential openness to multi-dimensional reality; it is quite different from the reasoning of Hobbes or Bentham or Nozick or Rothbard—to say nothing of Rand. Reason goes hand in hand with faith in the sense of Hebrews 11. (In his remarkable interview with Malcolm Muggeridge, telecast October 5, 1980, Buckley draws out Muggeridge on the relationship between faith and reason; Muggeridge points to the example of Pascal as a great thinker who discovered that the scientist dealing with metric reality encounters "a sort of cul-de-sac, and (so concludes) that he could only fulfill his life and grasp what it was about and relate himself to its true reality through faith." (Transcript, pp. 7-8)

To be a "libertarian of this world" means to be an individualist, to seek to reduce the scope of governmental regulation, to provide increased incentives of various kinds for economic growth where

practicable, and to oppose economic monopoly and oligopoly. It also means to support a strong foreign and defense policy especially in regard to Soviet expansion, and it calls for an understanding of the peculiar ideological structure of Marxist Communism. The "libertarian of this world" is not allowed the luxury of dreaming that he may isolate himself from the international power struggle and reduce military spending to negligible proportions.

Finally, a Buckleyian libertarian of this world is open to *tradition*. It is because of this aspect of his thought, I believe, that Buckley originally chose and still chooses to call himself a conservative rather than a libertarian. (Many readers may be surprised at his confession in the Introduction to his anthology on conservatism that he had at times wondered whether he was a "true conservative"; he was "philosophically" but not "temperamentally" a "member of the breed.") He emphasizes that he enjoys a "salty society" in which there is a great deal of controversy. He also enjoys having good friends with viewpoints sharply different from his own: *e.g.*, J. K. Galbraith.

Buckley rejects completely any notion that it is either possible or desirable to try to jump out of the world and begin anew with some creature who is not man. Although he regards himself as an individualist, he would scarcely agree to regard economic or "satisficing" man as a true individual. Rather, the individual acts from a variety of motives and responds to many dimensions of his experience. His mind is not a *tabula rasa*. No contemporary individual may ignore the tradition of his country and of his civilization. In the case of Americans, our duty is to study the roots of our civilization and to draw sustenance from them. Buckleyian man is concrete, historical man, open to the truth of tradition.

Perhaps it would be helpful to compare Bill Buckley's idea of tradition with that of a river with many tributaries. Some of them reach back to ancient times, to Greece, to Israel, and to Rome. Some flow in from Chartres—and from wherever

Thomas Aquinas taught. Others commence with the artistic glory of the Renaissance; others with 1688 and 1776. An important tributary may flow from the agrarian South, for as Buckley put it in *Cruising Speed*, "On the maternal side, the heritage is Southern, with Robert E. Lee in the background." There is, one suspects, a definite place for the Nashville Agrarians. Finally, a tributary should flow from the Manchester (or should it be the Chicago?) school of economics. Perhaps the last two strands of Buckleyian "tradition" help explain why the same man who admires the Nashville Agrarians, whose manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* rejected modern, industrialized, predominantly urban civilization, could be the first to sign up on the concorde supersonic jet.

Incongruities abound in tradition, Buckley seems to say. That is the way of a world open to mystery and anomaly. The important consideration for the conservative thinker is this: to continue the search for an integral vision of reality capable of inspiring a culture while drawing the strength of creativity from our age of fragmentariness. Such a vision is something quite different from uniformity on the intractable issues of the day, from race relations to medical ethics, from social justice to foreign policy, from problems of pollution to approaches to the "Third World." On these issues, Buckley is careful to emphasize, "there is no paradigmatic 'conservative' position." (*American Conservative Thought*, p. 123.)

For Buckley, a new integral vision inspired by conservatism would be something that results from the best efforts of the best conservative minds, without being the conscious plan of anyone. Indeed, in the end such a vision might not even be called conservative. It would simply be the result of unblocking and unleashing the creativity of our writers, artists, craftsmen, technicians, workers, farmers, poets, and businessmen alive to the reality—worldly and otherworldly—in which we all participate.

No passage in Bill Buckley's writings captures the range and subtlety of his con-

servatism so well as the final paragraph to his important Introduction to *American Conservative Thought in the Twentieth Century* (1970):

Will we all be saved then? "Whom knows," as Leo Durocher once thoughtfully put it. I hope so, caring as I do that we shall be saved from this dreadful century, whose name stands for universal ignominy in the name of equality; and in the name of freedom, a drab servitude to anonymous institutional idealism. I hope and pray that, as time goes by, the twentieth century will shed the odium that clings to its name, that it may crystalize as the century in which the individual overtook technology—the century in which all the mechanical ingenuity of man, even when fired by the basest of political lusts, proved insufficient to sunder man's essential reliance on his Maker, the century in which we learned finally (no, not finally; we never learn finally), or at least for a period how useless it is, how dangerous it is, to strut about ideologizing the world when we need to know that it was born intractable and will die intractable. (p. 1)

A skeptic and a believer at once—how inaccurate is the portrait by Eric Hoffer of the truly true believer—Buckley's mind resonates happily to the tune played so sonorously by Michael Oakeshott, the distinguished British political theorist. It was Oakeshott who said only half-facetiously that this is the best of all possible worlds and *everything* in it is a necessary evil.

At his best zeroing in on the Newspeak of contemporary political language, Buckley might be called an Orwell of the Right. Most of his unyielding stands on contemporary issues are negative in character: they object to proposals he considers to be mad or foolishly defended. He is much less confident about the adequacy of his own proposals (witness the moderate, conciliatory tone of *Four Reforms*). No advocate of root and branch reform, he is not exactly for muddling through, either. The

paradigm—a more individualist society—is important, but any advance on it is "necessarily asymptotic," he declares. Still, even the paradigm is glimpsed rather than seen: here below we see, as in a glass, darkly. He never pretends to be more than a participant in the general conversation of mankind. It is inconceivable that he ever sees himself having a monopoly on "the truth" to resolve this or that practical problem. Because of his zest for dialogue, he can, at times, say outrageous things. He does not pretend to be speaking with the authority of a demigod, as does so much boring contemporary political prose. He has much too much fun to be mistaken for a humorless ideologue.

Mindful of the biblical injunction to be in the world but not of it, William F. Buckley never forgets that there is more to life than making money and acquiring power. (Having done both, he can speak with more than the usual academician's authority on the subject.) He plays the harpsichord, paints, writes novels, sails, and may even go now and then to a rock music concert. He would undoubtedly agree with John Adams' sentiment that "I study war in order that my children may study politics, in order that theirs may study poetry."

A theologically sophisticated man, Buckley never forgets that "human hands are soiled." Speaking sympathetically in the early '70's to the alienated youth of the counter-culture, he noted that:

Those who are a little older, and expect more from an intractable world, come more readily to terms with their world, which is not to say that we accept it as it is, merely that we will not try to change it into something it cannot become, for no reason more complicated than that human hands are soiled. (*Cruising Speed*, p. 93)

Although I would not presume to speak for him, I think that the spirit of Buckley's philosophy of practice argues against an attempt artificially to "fuse" libertarian and traditionalist elements in conservatism. "Fusion," after all, has the flavor of

a "system" about it: the Hegelian dialectic, for example. Buckley seems implicitly to argue not for a fusion at the level of political practice, but for a theory of practice that accommodates those aspects of both libertarian and traditionalist currents of thought which are compatible with a world run inevitably by people whose "hands are soiled"—*i. e.*, by human beings.

There are many other aspects of Bill Buckley's political thinking which I could discuss, were there world enough and time. One theme could be his nationalism—or better, his patriotism. As Elie Kedourie wrote, the two are not the same, for nationalism is an ideology. However, let me close by commenting briefly on his attitude toward religion. By this I do not mean to discuss his own views on the relationship between being religious and being conservative, for he has quite clearly and succinctly expressed himself on this issue:

Can you be a conservative and believe in God? Obviously. Can you be a conservative and not believe in God? This is an empirical essay, and so the answer is, as obviously, yes. Can you be a conservative and despise God and feel contempt for those who believe in Him? I would say no. (*American Conservative Thought*, xxix)

Rather, I mean to indicate the extent to

which Buckley's own version of conservatism rests on his religious views. Here one would fail to grasp his thinking at all unless one related it to his Roman Catholicism. It is in the framework of his pre-Vatican II Catholicism that one sees the difference between him and so many people who are called conservative but who idolize capitalism, the cult of technological efficiency, and the dogma of modern "progress." The world is to be enjoyed, but in measure, in the knowledge that all our victories and defeats here and now are evanescent. In this world there are no "ideological home runs," there is no "progress." The calm, serene acceptance, even enjoyment, of the intractability of the world is made possible by Buckley's faith in ultimate reality beyond time and the world.

I hope that Bill would not mind my concluding with this personal reference. One spring a few years ago, when it was my good fortune to be a guest at his home in Connecticut, Bill suddenly invited me to take a walk with him. A touch of winter was still in the air. I had left my coat in the trunk of his car. He lent me one of his jackets. As we walked along I felt in the pocket and drew out a book. It was the Missal (in Latin, of course). And so, after all is said and done, Cardinal Manning has the last word on the subject of this essay.