

The Fusionists on Liberalism and Tradition

RALPH RAICO

545

THE PUBLICATION OF a symposium on the question, "What is conservatism?"¹ provides us with an opportunity to explore once again a complex of issues frequently raised in these pages — that having to do with the differences between libertarianism and conservatism. In this article, I shall not attempt to deal with all of the areas covered by these differences, nor with the essays of all twelve contributors to Meyer's symposium. Instead, I shall deal merely with certain aspects of the attempted reconciliation of the two philosophies that goes by the name of "fusionism."

Frank S. Meyer and M. Stanton Evans are the two most notable exponents of the fusionist position, and they present their case in two essays in the present volume.² The problem they are trying to solve may be stated in this way: the term "conservative" when applied to various writers in America today (especially when applied by social democratic writers, who usually have little familiarity with the literature) appears, on closer examination, to be equivocal. The authors of the following two statements, for example, although they are both

sometimes considered "conservatives," clearly have widely divergent approaches to so basic a question as the nature of government:

In mankind's experience, government has always figured as an institution publicly representing shared insights into the meaning of life, God, man, nature, time.³

Society cannot exist if the majority is not ready to hinder, by the application or threat of violent action, minorities from destroying the social order. This power is vested in the state or government. . . . Government is in the last resort the employment of armed men, of policemen, gendarmes, soldiers, prison guards, and hangmen. The essential feature of government is the enforcement of its decrees by beating, killing, and imprisonment.⁴

There are, in fact, as Meyer and Evans point out, two distinct groups of writers which the term "conservative" in its current sense encompasses: those whose intellectual forebears are to be found chiefly in the ranks of the classical liberals of the 18th and 19th centuries (this group would include Hayek, Friedman,

Ralph Raico is the Editor-in-Chief of NEW INDIVIDUALIST REVIEW.

¹ Frank S. Meyer, ed., *What is Conservatism?* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964). 242 pp. \$4.95.

² Meyer, "Freedom, Tradition, Conservatism"; Evans, "A Conservative Case for Freedom."

³ Gerhard Niemeyer, "Risk or Betrayal? The Crossroads of Western Policy," *Modern Age*, Spring, 1960, p. 124. The context makes it clear that Prof. Niemeyer regrets the passing of this conception of government.

⁴ Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action* (New Haven: Yale University, 1949), pp. 149, 715.

von Mises, etc.), and those who trace their ideas back primarily to Burke and the 19th century conservatives (Kirk is the best-known representative of this group, which also includes others associated with *National Review* and *Modern Age*). The first group is called by Meyer the "libertarians," and the second the "traditionalists." Often libertarians and traditionalists attack one another vigorously, and some in each camp have even maintained that the two view-points are fundamentally at absolute odds. It is true that members of the two factions very often have had similar opinions on questions of immediate political importance (which is one of the chief reasons why they are looked on as factions of one movement), but anyone who has read the works of the two groups is aware that there exist significant differences on a more basic level. These have to do with such matters as the weight given to tradition, the arguments used for freedom, the priority allowed freedom as against other values (order, virtue, and so on), as well as with (as the quotations from Niemeyer and von Mises show) what I am afraid we may have to call the "philosophical presuppositions" of the two view-points. The imposing task the fusionists have undertaken, then, is to resolve the differences between libertarians and traditionalists—and this by showing that both have something of fundamental value to contribute to a common "conservatism" (for that is to be the name of the amalgamated movement), and that both are likewise at fault in certain respects.

WHAT THE LIBERTARIAN (or classical liberal) has to offer, the fusionists maintain, is a good understanding of the meaning of freedom, of the dangers facing it, and especially of the connection between economic and other forms of freedom. He is mistaken, however, in disregarding "value" and the moral law, and in having no understanding of the goal and *raison d'être* of freedom, which is "virtue." The traditionalist, on the other hand, is the complimentary figure to the libertarian, and brings to the syn-

thesis a—as the phrase goes—deep commitment to moral value, to virtue and so on. Moreover, he understands the part that tradition must play in the life of society, while the libertarian typically "rejects tradition." Thus, the stage is set for the synthesis, which will consist in a political philosophy developed on the basis of "reason operating within tradition," and upholding freedom as the highest secular end of man and virtue as the highest end of man *tout court*.

It will be seen that anything approaching an exhaustive critique of this thesis would be impossible here.⁵ What I shall attempt to do, therefore, is simply to clear some ground by examining certain points in the fusionist thesis, with the aim of helping to provide the basis for a more analytical and less rhetorical discussion of these issues than has sometimes been the case in the past.

Before one can determine to what extent, if any, classical liberalism⁶ must be modified, it is absolutely crucial, of course, for one to have a correct conception of what classical liberalism means. It appears to me, however, that in this regard, conservative and fusionist writers, while quite dogmatic, are also quite mistaken. As a rule, they are in the habit of treating liberalism in a casual, off-handed way, scarcely ever bringing forward any actual evidence to substantiate their rather free-swinging claims. At the risk of seeming unfair to M. Stanton Evans—which is certainly not my intention—I shall submit *his* conception of classical liberalism, which appears to me fairly typical of this view, to an extended analysis.

Evans states:

The libertarian, or classical liberal, characteristically denies the existence of a God-centered moral order,⁷

⁵ For a broader discussion of the fusionist position, see the forthcoming article by Ronald Hamowy in *Modern Age*: "Classical Liberalism and Neo-Conservatism: Is a Synthesis Possible?"

⁶ In what follows, I shall be using the terms "classical liberalism," "liberalism," and "libertarianism" interchangeably.

⁷ In a footnote to his essay (p. 232), Evans asserts that he is using "libertarian" to mean "the chemically pure form of classical liberalism," including the "acceptance of [an] anti-religious philosophy." Presumably he has abandoned this

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. [p. 69]

In this amazing statement, Evans asserts the following concerning the "typical" classical liberal or libertarian:

- (1) he denies the existence of a God-centered moral order;⁸
- (2) he alleges human freedom to be the single moral imperative;
- (3) aside from (2), he is a complete relativist, pragmatist, and materialist.

Let us deal with these allegations in detail.

(1) This is false, of course, in regard to the many liberals who were Christians (*e.g.*, Ricardo, Cobden, Bright, Bastiat, Madame de Stael, Acton, Macaulay, etc.).⁹ Indeed, many classical liberals (in-

terminology in the passage quoted here. For if he has not, then the assertion of the anti-religiosity of the libertarian would be merely an uninteresting tautology, entailed by Evans' personal terminology, and, moreover, the passage would then have to read: "The libertarian, or classical liberal, necessarily denies . . ."

⁸ It is difficult to see why Evans modifies the term "God-centered moral order" with the clause, "to which man should subordinate his will and reason." Presumably, the assertion of the existence of any moral order entails that one should subordinate one's will to it. As for the subordination of reason to this order, I take this to imply that God's moral order is not knowable by reason alone. Why such a view, even supposing that the typical libertarian maintained it, should be thought to be associated with freethinking and atheism, it is impossible to say. For it appears to be precisely the position of the Catholic Church: "Whilst therefore the Catholic believes that the moral law is knowable to man by sheer reason and experience, being the law of man's very nature, he believes that the fulfilment or non-fulfilment of it has more than natural implications." Thomas Corbishley, S. J., *Roman Catholicism* (London: Hutchin's University Library, 1950), p. 57 (ital. added). Since I cannot see that this clause could lead to anything but a confusion of the issue, I feel justified in ignoring it.

⁹ While it is logically possible for one to be a Christian and at the same time to have some other "center" than God for one's moral system, still the rule has been that those professing Christianity have attributed to God the central role in their ethical systems. I am therefore taking the Christian faith of a classical liberal as *prima facie* disproof of Evans' assertion.

cluding present-day ones) have felt that the connection between their political and their religious and ethical views has been a very intimate one. Frédéric Bastiat, for instance, who, because of his "superficiality" and "glib optimism" is sometimes taken to be the very paradigm example of a classical liberal, expressed himself as follows towards the end of one of his more important works:

There is a leading idea which runs through the whole of this work, which pervades and animates every page and every line of it; and that idea is embodied in the opening words of the Christian Creed—I BELIEVE IN GOD.¹⁰

John Bright was the man who, with Cobden, and for twenty years after Cobden's death, was the leader of the Manchester School in British politics and political and economic thought—surely a typical liberal, if there is such a thing. Yet the following characterization of Bright, by his most authoritative biographer, hardly seems compatible with Evans' description:

Religious feeling, in its simplest form, was the very basis of his life. He was always a Friend [*i.e.*, Quaker] before everything else; and a servant of God; a man of deep, though ever more silent devotion.¹¹

Although Christians were probably, and theists certainly, in the majority, it is true that a certain number of liberals were atheists or (much more frequently) agnostics: J. S. Mill, Herbert Spencer, John Morley, etc. Nevertheless, the following points ought to be made: (a) the denial of a "God-centered moral order" has been no more characteristic of classical liberalism than its affirmation; (b) even if a majority of liberals had been atheists and agnostics, the connection is so far accidental and historically-conditioned, and not logical; (c) supposing the majority of liberals to have been tainted with unbelief in one form or another, Evans still presents no reasons

¹⁰ *Harmonies of Political Economy* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1870), Part II, p. 150. Emphasis in text.

¹¹ G. M. Trevelyan, *The Life of John Bright* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), p. 104.

for dismissing the liberalism of Christian writers like Bastiat.

(2) The second charge—that the classical liberal or libertarian alleges “human freedom as the single moral imperative”—can hardly be seriously meant. Does Evans mean to say that liberals characteristically do not believe benevolence, or even lack of malice, to be morally enjoined on men? This cannot have been true of the many Christian liberals, and neither was it the case with the non-Christians, *least of all the Benthamite utilitarians* among them. Evans mentions only two names in connection with his general description: J. S. Mill and Herbert Spencer. Spencer explicitly states that, in addition to justice (respect for the rights of others), the moral code enjoins both “negative” and “positive” beneficence, the latter being the capacity to receive happiness from the happiness of others.¹² This may not be an especially elevated view of our moral obligations, but it is nonetheless sufficient to contradict Evans’ statement, at least in regard to one of the only two writers he mentions by name. But the statement is even more erroneous in regard to the utilitarian liberals. J. S. Mill makes their position clear in his well-known essay, “Utilitarianism”:

I must again repeat what the assailants of utilitarianism seldom have the justice to acknowledge, that the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator. In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. To do as you would be done by, and to love your neighbor as yourself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality.¹³

Far from being “characteristic” of classical liberalism, (2) is an attribute for which I doubt that a *single* example

¹² *Social Statics* (New York: Appleton, 1880), pp. 83-84.

¹³ *Utilitarianism, On Liberty and Representative Government* (New York: Dutton, 1950), p. 16.

could be found in the whole history of liberalism.

(3) EVANS GIVES US virtually no idea of what he might mean by these three highly-charged terms, “materialist,” “relativist,” and “pragmatist,” so we will have to deal with them as best we may.

“Materialist” may have a precise philosophical, or a loose vulgar, meaning. Taken in the first sense, the assertion would be absurd: if *any* metaphysics were characteristic of liberalism, it would probably be idealism in one form or another, not materialism. Taken in the vulgar sense of addiction to, or espousal of, “material” (usually sensual) pleasures, the assertion is also invalid. It is, indeed, hardly worth rebutting, since to support this allegation, Evans only adduces a statement by—Ernest Renan. We might as well point out, however, that, even ignoring the fact that “materialist” is scarcely a fair description of Bentham’s form of hedonism, and certainly not of J. S. Mill’s, the German liberals of the Classical period—*e.g.*, von Humboldt and Kant—and the French liberals of the Restoration—*e.g.*, Constant and Madame de Stael—assuredly had ideas on ethics and the destiny of man independent of any form of the pleasure philosophy.

In Evans’ view, the liberals were also typically “pragmatists.” Whether this is supposed to mean that they were followers of Peirce and William James, or, in some looser sense, that they believed that the truth was “what works,” is unclear. It would be tedious to attempt to salvage this claim by lending it some semi-reasonable meaning, and then showing that even then it had no foundation in fact. The rebuttal of the assertion, therefore, will wait upon its being given some sense.

Evans also claims under (3) that the liberals, aside from their adherence to freedom, have been complete “moral relativists.”¹⁴ This brings up an issue

¹⁴ At times Evans implies that, not only are libertarians moral relativists, but that, in consequence of this, they do not even hold that any-

which is frequently raised by conservatives: often, the essence of the "moral crisis of our age" is seen in the decline of faith in "absolute values." It should be clear that the question of moral relativism vs. moral absolutism cannot even be intelligently approached until we know what is to be understood by these terms, but conservatives, in discussing the subject, generally fail to indicate their meaning. In general philosophical discussion, the most important senses of the term "moral relativism" appear to be: (a) the idea that moral rules are defeasible, *i.e.*, are not unconditionally valid; and, more frequently, (b) the idea that "it is logically possible for two persons to accept verbally conflicting ethical statements without at least one of them being mistaken."¹⁵

(a) The idea that moral rules must be absolute in the sense that they are binding under all empirically possible conditions appears to be a sense in which conservatives often use the term. And yet it seems to me hardly a defensible position. Is it, after all, possible to cite a single moral injunction with content (not, *e.g.*, "It is good to do the Will of God") and with application to social questions (not, *e.g.*, "It is good to love God") which is unconditionally valid? Would it, for instance, be impermissible under *all* possible conditions to take the life of a man whom one knows to be innocent? It seems to me that circumstances could well be imagined in which this would be the reasonable — possibly even the moral — thing to do. Whether or not supported by classical liberals, moral absolutism in this sense appears to me to be an untenable position, the rejection of which cannot rightfully be made the grounds for censuring anyone.

(b) The more common sense of "moral relativism" is the position that it is possible for what appear to be contra-

thing is immoral! E.g., (addressing the libertarians): "If there were no objective standards of right and wrong, why object to tyranny? If murder and theft are *not* immoral, why object to them either singly or in the mass?" (p. 72; ital. in text). We will, however, deal only with the first claim.

¹⁵ Richard B. Brandt, *Ethical Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1959), pp. 271, 154.

dictory ethical statements to be true at the same time. A relativist in this sense might hold, for instance, that ethical statements are simply reports of the speaker's subjective feelings, and, therefore, the statement, "Murder is evil," may be true or false, depending on the actual feelings of the person who uttered it. Another form of this second sense would be that of a relativist who might hold that it is impossible to make ethical judgments transcending the bounds of different societies, and that an ethical statement may be "true" in one society and "false" in another. In this sense of relativism, however, the utilitarians (to take the group Evans probably has chiefly in mind) were almost paradigm *absolutists*. The reason for this is obvious. For any given situation in which an ethical judgment is to be made, the facts are what they are: one decision will maximize happiness, while a different one will not maximize it.¹⁶ Thus, although we may be mistaken in our decision, still, in principle, there is only one true judgment in each ethical situation.

Thus, of the two most important senses of "moral absolutism," one is a sense in which, whatever the liberals may have thought, it cannot reasonably be defended; the other is a sense for which many adherents of moral absolutism can be found among the classical liberals.

I HAVE SPENT a good deal of time—and probably the reader's patience as well—in discussing these two sentences. But my justification lies primarily in the circumstance that these statements well summarize the inaccurate conception—"impression" would perhaps be a better word—of classical liberalism which many conservatives hold and propagate. It may well be that classical liberalism is superficial, unrealistic and obsolete; apparently modern-day conservatives are eager to join most of the rest of the 20th century in announcing so. But before we can accept this evaluation—and

¹⁶ I am ignoring those very few cases in which the net utility of two different courses of action will be exactly the same.

private opinion is likely to be that people would be more happier, more rational, or whatever, if they abandoned Christianity. If the classical liberal is a Christian, then presumably he will be pleased to see the continuance of the tradition of Christian belief. Thus, on this question concerning a tradition in the *social* sector, liberals may have various personal views of their own, but liberalism itself has no policy recommendations to make whatsoever; does not, in fact, concern itself with the matter. How does it stand with the second sort of traditional arrangement, that pertaining to the government sector?

Here, before we can answer this question, we are compelled to make yet another distinction (and, as regards the libertarian-conservative controversy, possibly the most important one to be made): there are some traditional governmental arrangements which involve interference with the basic rights of the individual—the persecution of Protestants in France under the Old Régime, for example. Others, however, pertain to the structure of the government itself, and may not, in the first instance, have anything to do with individual rights at all, as, for example, a traditional adherence to bicameralism. In the case of the first sort of traditional governmental arrangement, the classical liberal characteristically and by the logic of his principles recommends the abolition of the tradition, *i.e.*, recommends that the government cease doing certain things. With regard to *this* category, then, the liberal may be said to “reject tradition”—that is, he holds that the traditionality of the arrangement can be no argument in its favor. It must be tested against certain standards, and, if it is found wanting, steps must be taken towards its elimination.

The case is different with the second sort of traditional governmental arrangement: that pertaining to the structure of government itself, as, for example, the extent and conditions of the franchise, and the form of the government (constitutional monarchy, republic, etc.). Such issues do not involve basic individual rights, in the sense that religious freedom and freedom from involuntary serv-

itude are basic. Their function, from the liberal point of view, is to aid the preservation of the basic rights, and they may therefore vary to a great extent, depending on time and place. As Edouard Laboulaye, probably the outstanding French liberal of the later 19th century, put it:

Whatever may be the epoch or the country, whatever the form of government or the degree of civilization, every man has the need to exercise his physical and spiritual faculties, to think and to act. Russian or Englishman, Frenchman or Turk, every man is born to dispose of his person, his actions and his goods. . . . With political liberties it is not the same; they change according to the time and country. One does not always have need of the same guarantees [of liberty]; as the form of attack varies, so does that of the defense.¹⁷

551

TO SUMMARIZE OUR rather rough classification of the senses of tradition (which is offered, with some trepidation, as a tentative basis for discussion):

- I. tradition in scientific and philosophical discourse: the traditional acceptance of a truth claim may be adduced as evidence in support of the claim;
- II. tradition in the functioning of society: the traditionality of a societal arrangement may be adduced as good reason for continuing the arrangement. This may apply either to:
 - A. the social (non-governmental) sector, *i.e.*, to traditions not involving government action, or to
 - B. the governmental sector. Under B we have
 - I. political traditions violating basic individual rights, and,
 - II. political traditions (primarily those having to do with the structure of government itself) which do not violate basic individual rights.

¹⁷ Edouard Laboulaye, *Le Parti Libéral: son Programme et son Avenir* (Paris, 1871), pp. 121-22.

In considering the differences between libertarianism and fusionism (as well as conservatism), I would locate the significant and challenging disagreement regarding tradition primarily under II A. That is, while classical liberalism as a rule restricts itself to attempting to secure individual rights by operating on the government sector (and in this endeavor may well make use of traditional political elements), fusionist and conservative writers claim that certain traditions within the social sector must often be regarded as necessary conditions for the preservation of liberty and ought to be actively cultivated and promoted by all supporters of a free society. This is especially true, in their view, of religion. The idea is suggested at times by Meyer and Evans, and is put succinctly by Stephen Tonsor, in his interesting essay, "The Conservative Search for Identity," in the present volume:

Religion is important to the democratic state not only because it preserves the fabric of society but also because it acts as the most important power to check the aggressive, centralizing, and totalitarian tendencies of the modern state. Without a strong religion, which remains outside and independent of the power of the state, civil liberty is unthinkable. The power of the state is, in part, balanced and neutralized by the power of the church. The freedom of the individual is most certain in that realm which neither church nor state can successfully occupy and dominate. [p. 150]

This represents, of course, a historical and sociological hypothesis concerning an alleged casual connection between religion and freedom. If true, it could indicate that certain policy recommendations might be in order which libertarianism would tend to frown on (Tonsor

himself maintains that tax money ought to be used to support church schools). In any case, it is a thesis which ought, I think, to be elaborated and critically and dispassionately examined, for it appears to me to be the most interesting and the most plausible of the fusionist claims.

This is only one of a number of important issues raised by fusionism which it is impossible to go into here. The claim that libertarians believe in the "innate goodness of man," and err in ignoring the reality of "original sin" (whatever might be meant by these two notions) is also one that should sometime be submitted to critical examination, if only because it is so often advanced. More important would probably be a discussion of the principle aim of fusionism: in place of our support of a free society for all our various ends (or simply for itself), to substitute support of it because it is a means to one particular end, namely "virtue," in whatever sense Meyer and Evans attach to the term.

Finally, it should be evident that none of what has been said here is to be taken as indicating hostility or rancor towards the authors whose writings have been discussed. In contrast to a number of conservatives, Meyer's and Evans' real concern for freedom is obvious. And that their intentions are good ones is evidenced by the statement of Meyer:

... the development of a common conservative doctrine, comprehending both emphases [traditionalist and libertarian]—cannot be achieved in a surface manner by *blinking differences or blurring intellectual distinctions with grandiose phraseology*. [p. 18, ital. added]

Certainly a true and important judgment. It is unfortunate that, in the heat of battle it is too often forgotten.

NEW INDIVIDUALIST REVIEW

Volume 3 — Number 3

Autumn 1964

THE CONSERVATISM OF RICHARD M. WEAVER

The Foundations of Weaver's Traditionalism	3	JAMES POWELL	
The Southern Tradition	7		
The Humanities in a Century of the Common Man	17	RICHARD M. WEAVER	517
Reflections on the Loss of Liberty	25	GEORGE J. STIGLER	
The Fusionists on Liberalism and Tradition	29	RALPH RAICO	
H. L. Mencken and the American Hydra	37	WILLIAM H. NOLTE	
New Books and Articles	47		

NEW INDIVIDUALIST REVIEW is published quarterly by *New Individualist Review, Inc.*, at Ida Noyes Hall, University of Chicago, Chicago 37, Illinois.

Opinions expressed in signed articles do not necessarily represent the views of the editors. Editorial, advertising, and subscription correspondence and manuscripts should be sent to NEW INDIVIDUALIST REVIEW, Ida Noyes Hall, University of Chicago, Chicago 37, Illinois. All manuscripts become the property of NEW INDIVIDUALIST REVIEW.

Subscription rates: \$2.00 per year (students \$1.00).

Copyright 1964 by *New Individualist Review, Inc.*, Chicago, Illinois. All rights reserved. Reproduction of less than 200 words may be made without specific permission of the publisher, provided NEW INDIVIDUALIST REVIEW is duly credited and two copies of the publication in which such material appears are forwarded to NEW INDIVIDUALIST REVIEW.