



Frank S. Meyer: The Fusionist as Libertarian Manqué

by Murray Rothbard



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The Fusionist as Libertarian

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UNTIL A FEW YEARS AGO, THE conservative spectrum could be comfortably sundered into the "traditionalists" at one pole, the "libertarians" at the other, and the "fusionists" as either judicious synthesizers or muddled moderates (depending on one's point of view) in between. The traditionalists were, I contend, in favor of state-coerced morality; the libertarians were allegedly in favor of liberty but soft on virtue; the fusionists—at least from their own perspective—combined the best of both poles by favoring tradition and morality on the one hand, but freedom of choice and individual rights on the other.

Now, however, it is impossible to sustain these neat classifications. In the first place, the varieties of conservative thought and policy have greatly expanded and diversified in recent years, so that the familiar triad can scarcely suffice any longer. It is difficult to figure out, for example, what the ideologies of the Rev. Jerry Falwell, the late Frank S. Meyer, M.E. Bradford, Harry Jaffa, Donald Atwell Zoll, Russell Kirk, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Jude Wanniski have in common; the venerable triad is scarcely enough to encompass them all. Secondly, the libertarians have broken off to form their own movement, and the characterization of them as devoid of concern for morality is distorted and oversimplified, to say the least.

Furthermore, the fusionists used to maintain that, while their success was far from assured among conservative intellectuals, at least the conservative masses were fusionists to the core. But the burgeoning of the Moral Majority and allied movements have at least called this into question.

I propose in this essay to examine conservatism by using as a fulcrum an analysis of the views of the leading conservative fusionist, Frank S. Meyer.

The conceptual chaos of conservatism may be traced back to its origins: a reaction against the New Deal. Since modern conservatism emerged in response to the particular leap into statism of the 1930s and 1940s, it necessarily took on the features of any "popular front": that is, defined more by what it opposed than what it stood for. As a result, conservatism came to include a congeries of opponents of the

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New Deal, who had little positive in common. If we wish to inquire what all of these groups had in common, beyond sheer hatred of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, I can think of only one theme linking them all: opposition to egalitarianism, to compulsory levelling by use of state power; beyond that, conservatism is Chaos and Old Night. Even negative reaction to the New Deal no longer suffices for anything like a coherent stance, since not only is there a problem of *which* aspects of the New Deal to focus on, but also whether the post-New Deal system should remain in place and be subject only to marginal adjustment—that is, whether conservatism should be a holding operation—or whether the system should be repealed *in toto*.

II

AT THE HEART OF THE dispute between the traditionalists and the libertarians is the question of freedom and virtue: Should virtuous action (however we define it) be compelled, or should it be left up to the free and voluntary choice of the individual? Here only two answers are possible; any fusionist attempt to find a Third Way, a synthesis of the two, would simply be impossible and violate the law of the excluded middle.

In fact, Frank Meyer was, on this crucial issue, squarely in the libertarian camp. In my view, his most important contribution to conservatism was his emphasis that to be virtuous in any meaningful sense, a man's action must be free. It is not simply that freedom and virtue are both important, and that one hopes that freedom of choice will lead to virtuous actions. The point is more forceful: no action *can be* virtuous unless it is freely chosen.

Suppose, for a moment, that we define a virtuous act as bowing in the direction of Mecca every day at sunset. We attempt to persuade everyone to perform this act. But suppose that instead of relying on voluntary conviction we employ a vast number of police to break into everyone's home and see to it that every day they are pushed down to the floor in the direction of Mecca. No doubt by taking such measures we will increase the number of people bowing toward Mecca. But by forcing them to do so, we are taking them out of the realm of action and into mere motion, and we are depriving all these coerced persons of the very possibility of acting morally. By attempting to compel virtue, we eliminate its possibility. For by compelling everyone to bow to Mecca, we are preventing people from doing so out of freely adopted conviction. To be moral, an act must be free.

Frank Meyer put it eloquently in his *In Defense of Freedom*:

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. . . freedom can exist at no lesser price than the danger of damnation; and if freedom is indeed the essence of man's being, that which distinguishes him from the beasts, he must be free to choose his worst as well as his best end. Unless he can choose his worst, he cannot *choose* his best.

And again:

For moral and spiritual perfection can only be pursued by finite men through a series of choices, in which every moment is a new beginning; and freedom which makes those choices possible is itself a condition without which the moral and spiritual ends would be meaningless. If this were not so, if such ends could be achieved without the continuing exercise of freedom, then moral and spiritual perfection could be taught by rote and enforced by discipline—and every man of good will would be a saint. Freedom is therefore an integral aspect of the highest end.¹

Freedom, in short, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the achievement of virtue. With Lord Acton, we may say that freedom is the highest *political* end; in that subset of ethical principle that deals with the legitimacy of the use of violence between men, the libertarian—as well as the fusionist Meyer—position holds that violence must be strictly limited to defending the freedom of individuals, their rights to person and property, against violent interference by others.

There is, then, nothing synthesizing about the "fusionist" position on this vital point; it is libertarian, period.

There is an odd aspect of the statist position on the enforcement of virtue that has gone unnoticed. It is bad enough, from the libertarian perspective, that the non-libertarian conservatives (along with all other breeds of statists) are eager to enforce compulsory virtue; but which group of men do they pick to do the enforcing? Which group in society are to be the guardians of virtue, the ones who define and enforce their vision of what virtue is supposed to be? None other, I would say, than the state apparatus, the social instrument of legalized violence. Now, even if we concede legitimate functions to the policeman, the soldier, the jailer, it is a peculiar vision that would entrust the guardianship of morality to a social group whose historical record for moral behavior is hardly encouraging.² Why should the sort

¹Frank S. Meyer, *In Defense of Freedom* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1962), 50, 55.

²For the historical record of the criminality of rulers of state, see Pitirim A. Sorokin and Walter A. Lunden, *Power and Morality: Who Shall Guard the*

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of persons who are good at, and will therefore tend to exercise, the arts of shooting, gouging, and stomping, be the same persons we would want to select as our keepers of the moral flame? Hayek's brilliant chapter on "Why the Worst Get to the Top" applies not only to totalitarianism, but, in a lesser degree to be sure, to any attempts to enforce morality by means of the state:

While we are likely to think that, since the desire for a collective system springs from high moral motives, such a system must be the breeding-ground for the highest virtues, there is, in fact, no reason why any system should enhance those attitudes which serve the purpose for which it was designed. The ruling moral views will depend partly on qualities that will lead individuals to success in a collectivist or totalitarian system and partly on the requirements of the totalitarian machinery.³

It would seem far better, then, to entrust the guardianship of moral principles to organized bootblacks than to the professional wielders of violence who constitute the state apparatus.

If the state is to be the guardian and enforcer of morality, it follows that it should be the inculcator of moral principles as well. Among traditionalist conservatives, Walter Berns has been particularly dedicated to the idea of the nation-state as moulding and controlling the education of the youth, even going so far as to laud the work of Horace Mann. Meyer, on the other hand, was never more passionate in his libertarianism than when contemplating state education and the public school system—that mighty engine for the inculcation of "civic virtue." The responsibility for educating the young rests properly with the parent, the family, and not with the state.

III

IF THE FUSIONIST POSITION *is* simply the libertarian position on freedom-and-virtue, then what of the fusionist critique of libertarianism: that it ignores virtue altogether in the pursuit of freedom (or, at least, ignores virtue insofar as it goes beyond freedom itself)? Much of this critique rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of what libertarianism is all about. Thus, Professor John P. East speaks

Guardians? (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1959).

³Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944), 136.

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of the traditionalist concern about contemporary libertarianism (which he, as a fusionist, seems to share): "of taking a valid point, in this case the importance of the individual and his rights, and elevating it to the first principle of life with all other considerations excluded".* Even Frank Meyer, uncharacteristically and in the heat of the ideological fray, identified libertarianism as a "libertine impulse [which] . . . raises the freedom of the individual . . . to the status of an absolute end."⁴ But this is an absurd straw-man. Only an imbecile could ever hold that freedom is the highest or indeed the only principle or end of life. Freedom is necessary to, and integral with, the achievement of any of man's ends. The libertarian agrees completely with Acton and with Meyer himself that freedom is the highest *political* end, not the highest end of man per se; indeed, it would be difficult to render such a position in any sense meaningful or coherent.

The confusion here, and the basic problem with conservatives' understanding of libertarianism, is that libertarianism per se does not offer a comprehensive way of life or system of ethics, as do, say, conservatism and Marxism. This does not mean in any sense that I am personally opposed to a comprehensive ethical system; quite the contrary. It simply means that libertarianism is strictly a *political* philosophy, confined to what the use of violence should be in social life. (As I have written above, libertarianism maintains that violence should be strictly limited to the defense of the rights of person and property against violent intervention.) Libertarianism does not talk about virtue in general (apart from the virtue of maintaining liberty), simply because it is not equipped to do so. As Professor Tibor Machan has pointed out, libertarianism is a "political doctrine . . . a claim as to what is permissible for human beings to do toward each other by means of the aid of force or its threat, nothing more".*

This does not mean that individual libertarians are unconcerned with moral principles or with broader philosophical issues. As a political theory, libertarianism is a coalition of adherents from all manner of philosophic (or non-philosophic) positions including

*John P. East, *Conservatism and Libertarianism: Vital Complements*, in *Freedom and Virtue*, ed. George W. Carey (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), p. 86.

⁴Frank S. Meyer, "Libertarianism or Libertinism?," *National Review* 21 (Sept. 9, 1969): 910.

*Tibor R. Machan, *Libertarianism: The Principle of Liberty*, in *Freedom and Virtue*, ed. George W. Carey (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), p. 37-38.

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emotivism, hedonism, Kantian *a priori*ism, and many others. My own position grounds libertarianism on a natural rights theory embedded in a wider system of Aristotelian-Lockean natural law and a realist ontology and metaphysics.⁵ But although those of us taking this position believe that it only provides a satisfactory groundwork and basis for individual liberty, this is an argument within the libertarian camp about the proper basis and grounding of libertarianism rather than about the doctrine itself.

More characteristic of Meyer was his identification of the libertarian pole of conservatism, not with liberty as the only goal for man, but with classical liberalism. Nineteenth-century liberalism rested its defense of liberty not on natural rights or moral principle, but on social utility and—in the case of the classical economists—economic efficiency. The classical liberal defense of liberty tended to be based not on the perception of freedom as essential to the true nature of man, but on universal ignorance of the truth. In some cases the approach is taken that knowledge of ethical truth would necessarily require coercion, so that freedom can only rest on the impossibility of knowing what virtuous action might be. In this way the classical liberal, or moral "libertine," agrees from the other side of the coin with the traditionalists: they acknowledge that if we only knew what the good might be we would have to enforce it upon everyone.⁶

Meyer's strictures against the utilitarian classical liberals were sound and well taken. As he put it, nineteenth-century liberalism "stood for individual freedom, but its utilitarian philosophical attitude denied the validity of moral ends firmly based on the constitution of being. Thereby, with this denial of an ultimate sanction for the inviolability of the person, liberalism destroyed the very foundations of its defense of the person as primary in political and social matters."⁷ Meyer's mistake was in thinking that he was thereby indicting libertarianism per se when he was really attacking the classical liberal world-view underlying the underpinning for its own particular libertarian position. As Machan points out, "Classical

⁵This is essentially the position of Tibor Machan, Eric Mack, Douglas Rasmussen, Douglas den Uyl, Williamson Evers, Randy E. Barnett, Anthony Fressola, George H. Smith, and a host of other young libertarian political philosophers.

⁶The free market economist Milton Friedman, from the classical liberal perspective, has explicitly taken that very position. See Machan's essay in this volume, "Libertarianism," 40-41.

⁷Meyer, *Defense*, 1-2.

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liberalism may properly be regarded as far more than a political theory such as libertarianism, since it is philosophically broader, involving ideas about the nature of man, God, value, science, etc. Although libertarianism may indeed be defensible from a very specific philosophical perspective, it is not itself that perspective".*

Thus, Frank Meyer's strictures against libertarianism for neglecting virtue do not properly apply against libertarianism per se, since *qua* libertarianism it does not attempt to offer any theory except a political one; it is not competent to provide a general theory of ethics. His criticisms *do* properly apply to the broader ethical outlook of the utilitarian-emotivist-hedonic wing of libertarians, but not to the philosophy of the Aristotelian-Lockean natural rights wing. In other words, although he failed to realize it, Frank Meyer was writing, not as a fusionist attacking libertarianism, but as a natural law-natural rights libertarian attacking the philosophic perspective of the utilitarian-hedonic libertarians. In short, Meyer really wrote from within the libertarian perspective.

The utilitarian strain is particularly strong, in contemporary America, among the Chicago School wing of free-market economics: Milton Friedman, James Buchanan, Gordon Tullock, Ronald Coase, Harold Demsetz, et al. In recent years, the assault of utilitarian "efficiency" upon ethics has reached almost grotesque proportions in the Chicago School economic theory of law advanced by Professor Richard Posner and his disciples. The Posnerites deny that law should have (or does have) anything to do with ethical principles; instead, the question of who should be considered a tort-feasor or liable for invading property rights should be decided purely on the basis of social "efficiency." Property rights themselves, according to the Chicagoites, should be allocated on the basis, not of justice, but of alleged efficiency considerations.⁸ Indeed, some of the Chicagoite

*Ibid, 57

⁸Thus see Richard A. Posner, *Economic Analysis of Law*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little Brown, 1977); Posner, "Utilitarianism, Economics, and Legal Theory," *Journal of Legal Studies* 8 (January 1979): 103-140; Harold B. Demsetz, "Ethics and Efficiency in Property Rights Systems," in Mario J. Rizzo, ed., *Time, Uncertainty, and Disequilibrium* (Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books, 1979), 97-116. For critiques of Chicagoite Posnerism from a rights-perspective, see Ronald M. Dworkin, "Is Wealth a Value?" *Journal of Legal Studies* (March 1980): 191-226; Richard A. Epstein, "The Static Conception of the Common Law," *ibid.*, 253-76; Rizzo, "Law Amid Flux: The Economics of Negligence and Strict Liability in Tort," *ibid.*, 291-318; Charles Fried, "The Laws of Change: The Cunning of Reason in Moral and Legal History," *ibid.*, 335-53; Gerald P. O'Driscoll, Jr., "Justice,

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ventures, e.g. on economic analysis of sex and marriage, read like bizarre parodies of economics run riot, the sort of caricatures of economists in which Dickens was fond of indulging.⁹

IV

FOR TRADITIONALISTS the central object of concern and of imputed rights or obligations is the "community"; for libertarians it is the individual. For libertarians, communities are simply voluntary groupings of individuals, with no independent rights or powers of their own. The unit of analysis, the only entity that thinks, values, makes choices, is the individual. Again, there is no middle ground here; and, again, Frank Meyer's "fusionism" is squarely in the libertarian camp. Meyer begins his *magnum opus* with methodological individualism; only individuals exist, and "society" is only an abstraction for a set of relations between them. A crucial error of twentieth-century thought, as Meyer points out, is that "the set of relationships between man itself constitutes a real entity—an organism, as it were—called 'society,' with a life and with moral duties and rights of its own. This hypostatization of the sum of relations between men, this calling into being of an organism as the value-center of political theory, is the essential note of the doctrines which underlie and inspire every powerful political movement of the 20th century . . ." ¹⁰

So far, so good, and most conservatives as well as libertarians would agree. But then Meyer applies this analysis fully to the traditionalists' favored concept of "community":

For "community" (except as it is freely created by free individual persons), community conceived as a principle of social order prior and superior to the individual person, can justify any oppression of individual persons so long as it is carried out in the name of "community" or society or of its agent, the state.

Efficiency, and the Economic Analysis of Law: A Comment on Fried," *ibid.*, 355-66; John B. Egger, "Comment: Efficiency is Not a Substitute for Ethics," in Rizzo, ed., *op. cit.*, 117-26; Rizzo, "Uncertainty, Subjectivity, and the Economic Analysis of Law," *ibid.*, 71-90; Murray N. Rothbard, "The Myth of Efficiency," *ibid.*, 91-96.

⁹For an example, see Richard B. McKenzie and Gordon Tullock, *The New World of Economics: Explorations into the Human Experience* (Homewood, Ill.: Richard D. Irwin, 1975). Actually, Wilde's quip about the cynic applies equally well to these Chicagoite economists: they "who know the price of everything, and the value of nothing."

¹⁰Meyer, *Defense*, 28.

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Meyer goes on to warn that

this is the principle of collectivism; and it remains the principle of collectivism even though the New Conservatives who speak of "community" would prefer a congeries of communities . . . to the totalizing and equalizing national or international community which is the goal of the collectivists. This is to their credit. . . . But what the New Conservatives will not see is that there are no solid grounds on which the kind of "community" they propose as the end towards which social existence should be ordered can be defended against the kind of "community" the collectivists propose. . . . Caught within the pattern of concepts inherited from classical political theory, they [the New Conservatives] cannot free themselves from the doctrine that men find their true being only as organic parts of a social entity, from which and in terms of which their lives take value. Hence the New Conservatives cannot effectively combat the essential political error of collectivist liberalism: its elevation of corporate society, and the state which stands as the enforcing agency of corporate society, to the level of final political ends.¹¹

"Total state and 'plurality of communities,'" Meyer concludes, "do not constitute an antithesis; rather they are variants . . . of the same denial of the primary value, on this earth, of the individual person."¹²

The only genuine community among men, Meyer goes on to say, is the result of free and voluntary individual interactions, not of the aridity and despotism of state-imposed "community." The problems which traditionalists like Kirk and Nisbet ascribe to "loss of community," Meyer points out, really stem from "an excess of state-enforced community."¹³ In contrast, Meyer eloquently holds up associations of free persons:

To assert the freedom and independence of the individual person implies no denial of the value of mutuality, of association and common action between persons. It only denies the value of coerced association. When men are free, they will of course form among themselves a multitude of associations to fulfill common purposes when common purposes exist. The potential relationships between one man and other men are multifarious; but they are relationships between independent, conscious, self-acting beings. They are not the interactions of cells of a larger organism. When they are voluntary, freely chosen to fulfill the mutual needs of independent beings, they are fruitful and indeed essential. But . . . each man will find, as a free being, the relationships congenial to his

¹¹*Ibid.*, 130-32.

¹²*Ibid.*, 144.

¹³*Ibid.*, 130.

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specific needs.¹⁴

We conclude that, in this crucial area of political thought as well, Frank Meyer was not a "fusionist" but quite simply a trenchant individualist and libertarian. Always he championed the primacy of the individual, of his rights and liberty, as against all social institutions. Cooperation between men was fine, provided that it be free and voluntary; any coercion is a mockery of genuine community, and the state is particularly menacing whenever it goes beyond the use of force to guard individual rights against the coercion of others. This is no "third way," but simply libertarianism.

V

IN CHOOSING POLITICAL or social positions, two alternatives have been offered: custom or tradition on the one hand, the use of reason to discern natural laws and rights on the other; in short, tradition, or the use of reason to discern abstract principles on which to stand one's ground outside the customs of time and place. Here, too, is a profound difference between traditionalist and libertarian. The traditionalist is at bottom an empiricist, distrusting rational abstraction and principle, and wrapping himself in the custom of his particular society. The libertarian, as Lord Acton stated, "wishes for what ought to be, irrespective of what is." Or, as Gertrude Himmelfarb has summed up Acton's viewpoint, "the past was allowed no authority except as it happened to conform to morality."¹⁵

Here again, Meyer comes down basically on the libertarian side. Arguing against the traditionalists, he points out that there are many traditions; and how but by the use of reason can we decide between them? Time can hallow evil as well as good; it is no accident that the unreconstructed Stalinists in Russia are now dubbed the "conservatives." Surely they are, in the traditionalist sense. But if we are stuck within tradition, whatever it may happen to be, how do we

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 146-47. For a penetrating critique of the worship of the *polis* as against individual persons in classical political theory, see *ibid.*, 82-87, 136.

¹⁵Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Lord Acton: a Study in Conscience and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 204-05. Or, as one philosopher has defined natural law: it "defends the rational dignity of the human individual and his right and duty to criticize by word and deed any existent institution or social structure in terms of those universal moral principles which can be apprehended by the individual intellect alone." John Wild, *Plato's Modern Enemies and the Theory of Natural Law* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 176.

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know whether it is good, indifferent, or evil? Only principle can judge, can decide between, traditions; and reason is our key to the discovery of principle. Meyer puts it succinctly:

Against both the prevailing mode of thought and the New Conservative criticism, which are, each in its own way, appeals to experience, I propose the claims of reason and the claims of the tradition of reason. I do not assume that reason is the sole possession of a single living generation, or of any man in any generation. I do assume that it is the active quality whereby men (starting with a due respect for the fundamental moral knowledge of ends and values incorporated in tradition) have the power to distinguish what ought to be from what is, the ideal from the dictates of power. Upon these assumptions, I shall attempt to reestablish, in contemporary contexts, principles drawn from the nature of man. . . .¹⁶

And again:

. . . there is a higher sanction than prescription and tradition; there are standards of truth and good by which men must make their ultimate judgment of ideas and institutions; in which case, reason, operating against the background of tradition, is the faculty upon which they must depend in making that judgment. . . . To recognize that there is a need to distinguish between traditions, to choose between the good and the evil in tradition, requires recognition of the preeminent role (not, lest I be misunderstood, the sole role) of reason in distinguishing among the possibilities which have been open to men since the serpent tempted Eve. . . . But this is exactly what the New Conservatives refuse to recognize. The refusal to recognize the role of reason, the refusal to acknowledge that, in the immense flow of tradition, there are in fact diverse elements that must be distinguished on a principled basis . . . is a central attribute of New Conservative thought. It is this which separates the New Conservatism from the conservatism of principle. . . .¹⁷

While I contend that Meyer's position is essentially libertarian, he evidently waffles in places in an uncharacteristically murky manner. If reason is needed to decide between traditions, to judge good and evil, in what sense does reason not have the "sole" role here? In other places, Meyer, with evident inconsistency, speaks of tradition as properly a "guide and governor of reason," or of reason operating "within tradition." Here, Meyer is trying desperately to establish a third, fusionist way between libertarianism and traditionalism, but at

¹⁶Meyer, *Defense*, 11.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 41, 44-45.

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the price of inner contradiction and theoretical confusion. If reason is indispensable to judge good and evil and to decide between traditions, then obviously it cannot operate *within* tradition. For either reason is the ultimate arbiter, or tradition is; it is impossible to have it both ways. Fusionism has ineluctably run afoul of the law of the excluded middle (the product of reason, I might note).

Can we make any sense at all of Meyer's vague references to the proper role of tradition? Perhaps there is a clue in the clause, "starting with a due respect for the fundamental moral knowledge of ends and values incorporated in tradition." Perhaps this simply means that, if we wish to learn moral truth, we had better *begin* by finding out what the theorists of the present and past have had to say about it. This is not placing tradition above reason; it is simply employing common sense. If one wants to learn anything about the world, it saves time and energy, and adds a great number of insights, to say the least, to learn what has been written and thought on the subject, rather than each individual's attempting to spin out all knowledge from scratch. If Meyer or anyone else should think that the libertarian position is like Swift's spider, to spin everything out of one's head *a priori* without reference to thought of the past or present, then this would be only a bizarre caricature. Libertarians, one would hope, are intelligent human beings, and not solipsistic cretins.

Are there any other obeisances that libertarians may properly make to tradition? Simply to say that, in life, not *all* questions are matters of moral principle. There are numerous areas of life where people live by habit and custom, where the custom can neither be called moral or immoral, and where pursuit of custom eases the tensions of social life and makes for a more comfortable and harmonious society. It would be a false and perverted rationalism to say that any custom which cannot be proven on some other ground to be "rational" must go by the board. We can then conclude as follows: (a) that custom must be voluntarily upheld and not enforced by coercion; and (b) that people would be well advised (although not forced) to begin with a presumption in favor of custom, other things being equal. In a world, for example, where every man takes off his hat in the presence of ladies, an individual should be free not to do so, but at the risk of being generally judged a boor. If, on the other hand, this person's constitution is such that he would be likely to suffer a bad cold by exposing his pate, then we have here a higher moral consideration overriding the social harmonies of custom.

Returning to Frank Meyer, I still believe that the basic thrust of his

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fusionism in this dispute, as incoherent as it ultimately may be, is libertarian. Reason turns out to be decisive, and it seems to me that the bows to tradition are more ceremonial than substantive. I suspect, without being able to prove it, that Meyer was bowing here to what he deeply felt to be the exigencies of organizing a conservative movement which would include traditionalists, libertarians, fusionists. In short, that in this as in some other instances, Meyer was writing with movement rather than strictly intellectual exigencies in mind.

Meyer has a sensitive discussion of Burke which I think is relevant here. In discussing the ambiguities in Burke's thought between principle and prescription—the very problem here under discussion—he at one point explains the prescriptive side as emanating from Burke the statesman. The New Conservative disciples of Burke, Meyer points out, "are not statesmen like Burke; the prudential choice between immediate practical alternatives, which is the proper task of the statesman, leads in the scholar, the political theorist, to a theoretical impasse."¹⁸

I submit that, on this particular issue, Meyer was writing as a statesman instead of a political theorist.¹⁹

Another reason that I believe Meyer to be at heart a libertarian on this issue of principle vs. tradition is the stance he took on the related question of radical change vs. maintenance of the status quo. For as the post-New Deal system becomes ensconced in American life, many conservatives have increasingly become content to retain that system and simply to tinker with marginal reform. In a sense as good traditionalists, they aspire only to preserve the essential status quo and to keep the society from becoming *more* collectivist and more egalitarian than it already is. But Frank Meyer would have none of this. Until the end of his life he insisted on pursuing the unswerving goal of repealing the New Deal system root and branch, in fact, to repeal most of the accretions of statism in American life since the Civil War. Meyer's famous bitter critiques of Abraham Lincoln were not simply exercises in antiquarian disputation, nor of course were

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁹I do not write this to denigrate Frank Meyer the man. It is certainly arguable that organizing and leading an ideological movement may be just as admirable as constructing an edifice of political theory. Meyer was a committed man, as well as a theorist and scholar; he was not content only to discover good and evil. Believing that twentieth-century man had taken a tragically wrong road, he believed it his duty to organize to change that road. He believed it incumbent upon him to act on his theoretical insights.

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they defenses of racism and slavery.²⁰ Meyer saw clearly that the changes Lincoln wrought in American society were the decisive shift toward the centralizing and despotic nation-state, changes that were built upon by the Progressive era, by Woodrow Wilson, and finally by the New Deal. To Meyer, the goal of a truly principled conservative movement was to repeal all that, and to establish a just polity.

But this means that Meyer was truly a radical conservative, that is, someone who desired root and systematic change; he was in radical opposition to the statist status quo. Hence he took his stand, once again, with the libertarians, who are also principled radicals, and with much the same principles.

VI

ANOTHER critical dispute between traditionalists and libertarians is over the role and the nature of order. To the traditionalist, order is the overriding consideration, and order can only be achieved by a massive imposition of state coercion. To the traditionalist, liberty is arrant chaos and disorder, and the libertarian is someone who wishes to sacrifice order on the altar of liberty. The libertarian, on the contrary, has a diametrically opposed view. To him, the only genuine order among men proceeds out of free and voluntary interaction: a lasting order that emerges out of liberty rather than by suppressing it. With Proudhon, the libertarian hails Liberty as the "Mother, not the Daughter of Order." In this way, the libertarian sees the harmonious interaction of free people as akin to the harmonious interaction of natural entities that is summed up as "natural law."

State coercion, on the other hand, is viewed by the libertarian as a pseudo-order which actually results in disorder and chaos. State-imposed order is "artificial" and destructive of the harmony provided by following the natural order. Economic science has long shown that individuals, pursuing their own interests in the marketplace, will benefit everyone. The free market has been shown to be the only genuine economic order, while state coercion hampering that market only subverts genuine order and causes dislocation, general impoverishment and, eventually, economic chaos. Moreover, one of our most distinguished free-market economists, F.A. Hayek, has extended the concept of what he has trenchantly termed "spontaneous

²⁰Frank S. Meyer, "Lincoln Without Rhetoric," *National Review* 17 (Aug. 24, 1965): 725; *idem.*, "Again on Lincoln," *National Review* 18 (Jan. 25, 1966): 71, 85.

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order" to include many other activities than the economic sphere.²¹ Hayek has pointed out that the evolution of human language itself was not imposed by coercion from above but emerged from the free and voluntary interaction of individual persons. To use a noted phrase of Hayek's, language, the origin of money, and the market itself were products or byproducts of human action, but not of human design.

An eloquent statement of the libertarian view of order was given [to] us by Paine:

A great part of that order which reigns among mankind is not the effect of government. It had its origin in the principles of society and the natural constitution of man. It existed prior to government, and would exist if the formality of government was abolished. The mutual dependence and reciprocal interest which man has upon man, and all parts of a civilized community upon each other, create that great chain of connection which holds it together. The landholder, the farmer, the manufacturer, the merchant, the tradesman, and every occupation, prospers by the aid which each receives from the other, and from the whole. Common interest regulates their concerns, and forms their laws; and the laws which common usage ordains, have a greater influence than the laws of government. In fine, society performs for itself almost every thing which is ascribed to government.²²

As to Frank Meyer, it is clear throughout his work that he believes in the order of liberty rather than in state coercion. In reply to the traditionalists, he points out that *all* social systems have *some sort* of order, and that the relevant question, then, is not: order or no order? but *what kind* of order?²³ The order he evidently believes in is one of freedom: of the protection of the rights of person and property, and of a free market economy—in short, the order of libertarianism. Once again, "fusionism" turns out to be libertarianism in another guise.

VII

FINALLY, A FASCINATING problem within conservatism transcends the

²¹See in particular F. A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, Vol. 1: *Rules and Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973). Perhaps the earliest use of the phrase "spontaneous order," where the concept is developed much as Hayek would do later, and applied to the diffusion of scientific knowledge, is in Michael Polanyi, *The Logic of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

²² Thomas Paine, "Rights of Man, Part Second," in P. Foner, ed., *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine* (New York: Citadel Press, 1945), 1: 357.

²³ Thus, see Meyer, *Defense*, 64-65.

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traditionalist-fusionist-libertarian triad altogether, and furnishes an example of the triad's insufficiency in encompassing problems within conservative thought. Broadly, this is the question of "populism" vs. "elitism," that is, does one pin one's hopes for proper social change and a just society on the mass of the public or on an elite minority? Or, to put it another way, who is The Enemy? Which social groups or institutions constitute the permanent menace and enemy to be combatted and guarded against?

Originally, the traditionalists (Kirk, Viereck, Wilhelmson, et al) could be placed squarely in the elitist camp. The masses were The Enemy, as I see their views, and a strong state and repressive institutions headed by the state were needed to keep the masses in check. The result was an inherent pessimism about the future. For, since the late nineteenth century, the masses have voted, and therefore the conservative cause has seemed ineluctably doomed.²⁴

Libertarians, on the other hand, tended to be far more populist. To libertarians, the masses are not The Enemy. The Enemy, in the dramatic terms of Spencer and Nock, is the state. This does not mean that libertarians naively believe that the masses are necessarily wise or good. It is simply that the mass of the public spends most of its time on the business of making a living; their political interests are fitful and evanescent. At their worst, the masses may conduct a lynching or two, but then they are back to their daily affairs. But the state consists of full-time professionals in coercion. It is the business of the state apparatus never to rest. So the state, rather than the masses, is the permanent Enemy. This has meant, in the libertarian tradition, that either the state is to be abolished, or, if retained, that it be kept small and weighed down with fierce restrictions and greeted by permanent social hostility. Jefferson's "eternal vigilance [as] the price of liberty" was directed against the state.²⁵

But it is not just that libertarians direct their fire against the state. They also perceive that the masses, as well as numerous individuals, are oppressed by the state, that the state benefits a minority power

²⁴ Among Chicago free-market economists, George Stigler has come to the position that liberty is irretrievably doomed so long as universal suffrage exists. Since the prospects for repealing universal suffrage seem about as favorable as for the restoration of the Stuarts, pessimism becomes inevitable.

²⁵For the influence of *Cato's Letters* and other radical English libertarians of this stripe on the American revolutionaries, see Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967).

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elite at the expense of most of those it purports to help. In recent years, as part of this analysis, economists have shown that the poor are injured rather than helped by the welfare state. But further, statism deeply violates the basic laws of man's nature. For, if the state's interest really clashes with the majority of the people, with their freedom, happiness and prosperity, then education of the masses in this truth will be likely to result eventually in libertarian victory, a victory which would replicate and extend the partial victories of their classical liberal forebears in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The original correlation of traditionalist with the elite and libertarian with populism, however, has long been swept away. Since the 1960s, traditionalist conservatives have become increasingly pro-populist, culminating in the current New Right. Partly, as George Nash indicates in his history of the modern conservative movement, the shift in attitude toward the masses reflected a change in historical context. In the 1940s and 1950s conservatives were an embattled minority, and so saw themselves as an eternally beleaguered group fending off both state and mass. But as conservatives began to grow and achieve political victories in the 1960s and 1970s, their attitude toward the masses swung one hundred eighty degrees, and we began to hear of a "silent majority" who knew in their hearts that conservatism was right.²⁶ In addition, such new traditionalists as Willmoore Kendall stressed the virtually absolute "rights" of the putative majority of the public.

In recent years, New Right publicist Jude Wanniski has attained the apotheosis of populism. As with Kendall, Wanniski and New Right populism far exceeds the libertarian bent, which is only a long-run tendency, and which denies the majority any power to interfere with the rights of the individual. Wanniski goes to the extent of declaring, in some sort of Hegelian fashion, that history consists of the masses fulfilling their will. In striking contrast to the original traditionalists as well as to libertarians, Wanniski proclaims that the masses never need to be educated; on the contrary, they are all-wise. The masses, at any time in history, know all. The task of political leadership is to articulate the wisdom of the masses and to bring them what they want, since what they want is always wise and right. Specifically, Wanniski sees the cunning of history as marching inevitably toward (a) a world state, and (b) greater and greater

²⁶George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

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democracy. Democracy becomes a positive and overriding good, in this view, because it more easily fulfills the inevitably wise and good desires of the masses.²⁷

In the face of this ultra-populism, the libertarian position is quite modest and commonsensical. It holds that the long-run interest of the masses and their basic human nature, is, in reality, opposed to statism, but this hardly guarantees instantaneous or even eventual success. It certainly doesn't imply the eternal wisdom of the general public.

As far as I know, Frank Meyer never addressed himself specifically to this question, but I think that his basic position was close to the libertarian one. Democracy was cogently criticized, and warned against as a menace to liberty, but so too was the State as well as more particular "communities." Probably Meyer, along with most other conservatives, grew more optimistic about the masses as conservatism gained political strength, but so far as that goes this is both an understandable and proper response to changing political realities. The point is that, holding the liberty and the rights of the individual as paramount, Meyer would never have succumbed to the adoration of the masses now so prevalent in the conservative movement. Once again, even though the familiar triad is not very helpful here, Meyer's "fusionist" position is basically libertarian.

VIII

I CONCLUDE FROM a study of its founder and leading exponent that "fusionism" does not really exist. In all the crucial aspects of political philosophy, Frank Meyer was a libertarian. There is no triad, but only two very different and largely antagonistic poles. In the one area where Meyer differed substantively from the libertarian position, reason as being "within tradition," I submit that the attempt was so baldly fallacious that it can only be explained as a heroic or desperate (depending on one's point of view) attempt to find a face-saving

²⁷Jude Wanniski, *The Way the World Works* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978). On the evidence of the book, the point of all this seems to be specifically political: that is, to argue why a Republican Presidential candidate who calls for tax reduction, maintenance of government spending at the current level, and a balanced budget is not being an irresponsible demagogue. He is not because the masses, on the evidence of Gallup polls, etc., want all three, and therefore they must be right. It is the task of conservative intellectuals to find out why they are right, and it is at this point that Wanniski brings in the *deus ex machina* of the "Laffer curve," which purports to resolve these contradictions. But in this paper we are concerned only with the historical-theoretical underpinnings for this political gimcrackery.

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formula to hold both very different parts of the conservative movement together in a unified ideological and political movement. To use Marxian jargon, fusionism often seems like an attempt to paper over the contradictions within conservatism. I venture to assert that, if we were living in a very different kind of society where there was no political strife or movements, and political disputes were strictly confined to political theory in the cloistered groves of academe, there would have been no fusionism and Meyer would have acknowledged himself as a libertarian, of the natural rights variety. In short, I believe that fusionism is a "myth" in the Sorelian sense, an organizing principle to hold two very disparate wings of a political movement together and to get them to act in a unified way. Intellectually, the concept must be judged a failure.