

## The Failure Of Fusionism In The Libertarian- Traditionalist Debate:

### Frank Meyer's Equivocation Of The Two Freedoms

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As all who follow the philosophies of the modern conservative movement know, there are two great branches of conservative philosophy which take rather radically divergent paths on many issues of ideology and policy, but which have stood together against many of the expansions of left-liberal state libertarianism and traditionalist conservatism.

In 1962, a prominent American conservative, Frank S. Meyer, penned a volume titled *In Defence of Freedom: A Conservative Credo* [Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1962], which he hoped would end the ideological divergence between these two schools of political thought. Meyer proposed numerous ancillary arguments, but the core of his position rested in the nature of virtue and the paradox of freedom in relation to virtue.

Too many libertarians, according to Meyer [pp. 53-61], valued liberty as an end, rather than properly as a necessary means to an end. But the fundamental error in the libertarian-traditionalist dispute is made on the traditionalist side. Forgetting the teachings of ethical philosophy and moral theology, traditionalists demand that the state enforce virtue:

'The conservatives of the last century were sound in their fundamental philosophical position, upholding the objective existence of values based upon the unchanging constitution of being as the criteria for moral thought and action. They staunchly held the line against the assault of utilitarianism, positivism and scientism, but, on another level they failed philosophically, deeply misreading the nature of man. They would not or they could not see the correlative to their fundamental philosophical position:

acceptance of the moral authority derived by transcendent criteria of truth and good must be voluntary if it is to have meaning; if it is coerced by human force, it is meaningless. They were willing, if only the right standards were upheld, to accept an authoritarian structure of state and society. They were, at the best, indifferent to Freedom in the body politic; at the worst, its enemies.' [pp. 2-3]

For Meyer, this position is fundamentally wrong-headed, and the central purpose of his book militates against it:

'My intention in writing this book is to vindicate the freedom of the person as the central and primary end of political society.' [p.1] Meyer lauds freedom throughout.. 'The apprehension of man as of such a nature that innate Freedom is of the essence of his being is the central axiom upon which this critique of political thought is founded,' [p. 231 and '...the glory of man's being is that he is free to choose good or evil, truth or error ...' [p. 49]

In Meyer's view, of course, this necessity of freedom produces a paradox in the traditionalist conservative's reasoning. Traditionalists hold that virtue is a goal toward which all human action should aim, but by their own metaphysical philosophy and theology, they assert that to be virtuous, or morally good, actions must be freely chosen. When traditionalist conservatives attempt to utilize the power of the state to enforce virtue, therefore, they contradict their own presuppositions, for if they succeed in forcing virtuous action, by the very fact that it has been forced, it ceases by the very nature of things to be truly virtuous.

On the surface, of course, Meyer's argument has a certain easy plausibility, but the heart of the argument rests upon the logical fallacy of equivocation, whereby a word is used in more than one meaning in a given argument: 'Only man is rational. No woman is a man; therefore, no woman is rational.' Unless the speaker is a very extreme type of sexist, the

argument is invalidated by the logical fallacy of equivocation. Man is used in the first premise in its meaning as humankind, while in the second premise it clearly refers only to the male gender.

In a like manner, but with nowhere near the same obviousness, Meyer commits an equivocation.

Freedom, of course, has many meanings, but two very distinct uses of the term are as political freedom and as metaphysical freedom of the will.

Metaphysical freedom of the will may have external consequences - people often are able successfully to accomplish externally that which they will internally - but the presence of metaphysical free will neither guarantees nor requires that turn of events.

If man enjoys a metaphysical freedom of the will, and this article must operate on that assumption because that is Meyer's assumption in creating his paradox, then a man continues to enjoy that freedom of will even while chained in the dungeon of a tyrant.

The chained prisoner can commit virtually no physical acts, and yet he can will whatever he will.

Richard Lovelace, the heroic cavalier poet, was not engaging in poetical fancy when he uttered his famous closing stanza of 'To Althea, from Prison':

'Stone walls do not a prison make,/Nor iron bars a cage:/Minds innocent and quiet take/That for an hermitage./If I have Freedom in my love,/And in my soul am Free/Angels alone, that soar above,/Enjoy such liberty.'

A man chained hand and foot to the wall of a keep can love or hate God and his fellow man.

He may will to knuckle under to the tyrant's wishes - even though he not be given that option - or he may will to resist the unspoken demands of his oppressor.

He may pass his hours, days, or years in prayer and contemplation or in rage or in the obscene delights of impure imaginings.

He may will any act, though he may not actually physically accomplish the act(s) willed.

He is as free in his will as he has ever been or as he will ever be.

His practical political freedom, of course, is quite another matter.

We see this same paradoxical situation if we consider a man presented with a contract and threatened with a gun by the other party to the contract.

Both the law-judge and the moral theologian would hold the contract not to be binding because of the absence of free choice in the assent to the same, but the freedom they would find lacking is the socio-political freedom of which we have spoken before.

Should the contract contain an implicit or explicit affirmation of the heretical or the blasphemous or even the seriously untrue, the moral theologian would assert that the threatened victim must not affirm it, even though he lose his life by that refusal.

The reasoning of the moral theologian in this regard rests upon the assumption that the victim has not lost his metaphysical freedom by those circumstances which clearly deprive him of his socio-political freedom.

A meaningful contract requires the exercise of that socio-political freedom which the victim specifically lacks, but a moral or immoral act requires only that metaphysical freedom which is inalienable while the faculty of will functions internally unimpaired.

Martyrs are exactly those who are 'given an offer they can't refuse'--and who refuse.

Sir Thomas More was ultimately confronted with the choice of acknowledging Henry VIII as head of the Church in England, or of retaining his loyalty to the Pope at the cost of his life.

He chose the latter.

If the threat of torture and death cannot alienate the faculty of free will, then *a fortiori* human positive legislation threatening fines or imprisonment cannot alienate it.

Interestingly, B.F. Skinner, the famous behaviourist psychologist, has inverted the false paradox of Frank Meyer and has utilized it in defence of the deprivation of socio-political freedom.

Since we are all conditioned anyway, Skinner's *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* argues, and since we have illusion of free choice, no harm can result from our consciously conditioning future generations for positive social traits.

The true complexity of the pseudo-paradox becomes abundantly clear when we contrast the views of certain famous historical figures with one another.

Tomas de Torquemada, the infamous Grand Inquisitor of Spain, was obliged by his ecclesiastical commitments to hold a belief in the reality of metaphysical free will in man, but his general behaviour makes transparently clear that he held no truck with everyday notions of liberty, such as freedom of religion or freedom of speech.

Contrast Torquemada with the English moral philosophers David Hume and John Locke.

Hume was a hard determinist and Locke a soft determinist, but despite this divergence, neither of them held the slightest belief in metaphysical free will [Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, II, iii, 1; Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II, I]

Although both these men held that all human decisions are predetermined by events that can causally be traced back in time to a point before the birth of any individual decision-maker, they both were strong advocates of economic and political freedom.

Although the ultimate wellsprings of any human decision lay in the unfreedom of theological, physical, and psychological necessity according to both Locke and

Hume, interference with the carrying out of what a man wills was an imposition on an important freedom. This social, economic, and political freedom had no metaphysical base, in the view of these British moralists, and yet its abridgement made men altogether less productive, less well-ordered, and less happy.

Meyer's exploitation of the pseudo-paradox of the traditionalists' pursuit of virtue through the enforcement mechanisms of the state fails, therefore, and it is rather surprising that he failed to perceive this failure.

Throughout his work, he draws upon the explanatory role that the necessity of free will for virtue has played in traditional Christian theodicies.

He even cites with approval the inscription from the Gate of Hell in Dante's *Inferno* [p. 49], and he glosses C.S. Lewis's famous dictum that 'Hell is God's last gift to man,' by explaining:

'..Freedom can exist of 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 the worst, he cannot choose his best.' [p. 50]

It is a strange blindness.

Meyer would never assert that the Christian, Moslem, or Jew who believed in the eternal punishment of the damned, by the holding of that dogma, lost thereby his freedom.

In fact, he asserts rather the contrary, that the full plenitude of freedom is enhanced by and ultimately grounded in the doctrine of everlasting reprobation.

If the relatively less severe sanctions of the state – fine, imprisonment, death, torture – deprive the prospective law-breaker of his freedom of action by the contemplation of their terrors, why would the believer in hellfire not lose by meditation upon that dread end that freedom upon which virtue

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ultimately depends for its existence?

Again, the distinction between governmental sanction, and private, individual non-violent, non-fraudulent action is one central to libertarian thought, but of little importance for Meyer's pseudo-paradox.

If a father breaks off all communication with a grown son because he regards him as a fornicator, that might be a consequence far more dreaded by the son than a court-ordered fifty dollar fine imposed for soliciting prostitutes.

A drug-taking stockbroker might well prefer some months in jail under governmental sentence than the loss of job and friends resulting from the free exercise of his employer's and his friends' libertarian-endorsed right to employ whom they will or associate with whom they please.

The point of this is not that the vital libertarian distinction between coercive governmental actions and permissible voluntary actions by individuals is invalid, but that Meyer has destroyed its validity within his seeming paradox.

Perhaps fusionism can be defended, but it cannot be sustained by the central argument that Meyer used to buttress *In Defence of Freedom*, for that argument rests upon an inadvertent application of the fallacy of equivocation.

**Free Life**