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Foreword

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What is the conservative committed to? According to some, the answer is quite simply nothing. Certainly, the argument goes, they are not committed to individual freedom: they defend only order, morality, religion and virtue - all 'traditionally' conceived. So it seemed to many classical liberals, libertarians and 'Old Whigs' in the early 1960s when they denounced traditionalists in the name of individual liberty, private property and reason. And so it also seems to many classical liberals and libertarians today.

Yet there is a more interesting - and more plausible - answer to this question. It was proferred in the 1960s by Frank S. Meyer, an American conservative who reserved his most severe criticism for conservatives he thought had misunderstood conservatism and its relation to liberal ideas - and so, he thought, misunderstood the basis of their own beliefs.

Meyer began his political life as a communist. Born in New Jersey in 1909, he was educated in Princeton, the London School of Economics, and Oxford, where he joined the Communist Party of Great Britain and was later elected president of the students' union as a self-proclaimed communist. Some 14 years later in 1945 he broke with the communist movement, having read and been deeply influenced by Hayek's The Road to Serfdom. By the late 1950s he had joined the National Review and had acquired a reputation as an uncompromising defender of individualism and individual freedom. He took issue with such prominent conservatives as Russell Kirk for lacking clear and distinct principles and for failing to understand the institutions that made up a free society.

Yet for all his criticisms of conservatives, it was conservatism that Meyer embraced. His complaint was that conservatives failed to ask, and properly answer, the question 'what should conservatives con□serve?' Meyer's answer was that they should conserve an inheritance at whose core lay a respect for individual freedom. But too many so□called conservatives, in his view, mistakenly elevated the claims of society above the individual, and were even willing to use the power of the state to try to enforce citizen virtue. This he thought a mistake because it failed to recognise that the achievement of virtue could not be a political question: the only political end was the preservation of freedom. Only free men could become virtuous. 'Unless men are free to be vicious they cannot be virtuous. No community can make them virtuous.'

In saying this, however, Meyer also tried to steer away from the kind of liberalism that embraced utilitarianism and had grown relativistic and unable to resist the moral onslaught of totalitarianism. In the end he was a 'fusionist' (although he disliked the label), for he tried to argue that a plausible conservatism must absorb the best of both the liberal and the traditionalist elements of its inheritance. To this end he edited an anthology, What Is Conservatism?, published in 1964, with contributions from 'conservatives' of varying stripes ranging from Russell Kirk and Willmore Kendall to F. A. Hayek and William F. Buckley. He himself tried to argue that there was a discernible consensus among conservatives.

Few were persuaded by Meyer that such a consensus actually existed or could be forged. But the interest of Meyer's contribution lies less in his assessments of what would hold existing conservatives together than in his account of what a plausible conservatism would amount to. Here Meyer has much to offer. And at a time when many conservatives are beginning to speak out again about the nature and the teachings of their tradition, Meyer's answer to the question 'what is conservatism?' is worth reprinting - and re-reading.

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