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Foreword

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Foreword

Hayek's essay 'Why I am not a Conservative' first appeared in 1960 as the final chapter of his treatise, *The Constitution of Liberty*. Strictly speaking, it was not really a concluding chapter; it was presented as a 'postscript' to the main text—a text whose concern was to articulate and elaborate upon the fundamental principles of classical liberalism. In this postscript Hayek attempted a task which the main treatise did not take up: to explain how the principles of classical liberalism set it apart from the conservatism with which it seemed to have so much in common.

Why Hayek chose to write a separate postscript, rather than incorporate his discussion of the distinction between liberalism and conservatism in the main body of the book, is a matter for speculation. One possible explanation is suggested by Hayek's response to certain criticisms of early drafts of 'The Constitution of Liberty', which complained that his theory was insufficiently libertarian. Pierre Goodrich, for example, in correspondence with Hayek, took him to task for giving too much scope to government intervention. Hayek's response was that this may indeed be so; yet at the same time his objective in writing 'Constitution of Liberty' was to establish a principled position which would broaden the basis of liberalism and so build a philosophy that could present a plausible alternative to the totalitarian ideals which still held such attraction. To do this, Hayek thought it necessary to articulate a philosophy which was capacious enough to accommodate not only 'pure' classical liberals but also 'socialist liberals' at one extreme, and 'catholic liberals' at the other. In writing *The Constitution of Liberty* Hayek was to some extent concerned not to turn away potential allies of the liberal cause.

The postscript, however, suggests that, whatever his ambitions, Hayek clearly saw himself as a liberal rather than a conservative. And in this essay, he makes it plain that there are substantial differences between liberalism and conservatism as political doctrines. Indeed, he accuses conservatism of a 'fondness for authority' and a 'lack of understanding of economic forces', for 'order appears to the conservatives as the result of the continuous attention of authority'. Moreover, he states quite bluntly that the conservative, while not lacking in moral conviction, lacks political principles 'which enable him to work with people whose moral values differ from his own for a political order in which both can obey their convictions'. This is important because 'it is the recognition of such principles that permits the coexistence of different sets of values that makes it possible to build a peaceful society with a minimum of force'. And finally, he suggests that its lack of principles, and particularly its refusal to take a principled stand on the wrongness of coercing those whose actions do not themselves invade the liberty of others, makes conservatism a much more welcoming new spiritual home for the repentant socialist.

Since it first appeared, this essay by Hayek has attracted considerable attention. Conservatives have seldom liked it; and liberals have seldom agreed with it in its entirety. Yet its value lies not in its 'correct' opinions but in its sharpness, which forces liberals and conservatives alike to reconsider where they stand. And at a time when liberals and conservatives, no less than socialists, have much reconsidering to do, Hayek's essay should be read as a welcome provocation.

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