

Why I, Too, Am Not a Conservative: The Normative Vision of Classical Liberalism

James M. Buchanan

Northampton, Massachusetts: Edward Elgar, 2005 (106 pages)

Good things often come in small packages. Or as Blaise Pascal once said, “I didn’t have enough time to write you a short letter.” Likewise, Buchanan’s book is a slender volume with twelve concise, well-organized chapters. The essays range a bit, but as a whole, the themes form a coherent collection. The experience of reading the book will vary according to the reader’s previous familiarity with Buchanan’s writings. Even to newcomers, however, it will be enjoyable and provocative. For the audience of this review in particular, Buchanan’s efforts are helpful in forming a coherent Christian worldview.

Buchanan opens with an essay that has the same title as the book—which is, in turn, a sequel to a famous Hayek essay. Distinguishing between conservatives and classical liberals, Buchanan notes that the two groups had been in a relatively lonely bed together for much of the twentieth century, battling against socialism on philosophical grounds and against massive government intervention in policy terms. Although it was an understandable alliance, Buchanan notes that this conflation has also led to confusion: The two groups “seem to share basic values when, in fact, their positions rest on very different foundational attitudes” (5).

For one thing, conservatives face their own internal tensions. For example, they place a positive value on that which is, implying both a bias toward the status quo as well as an assumed ability to judge outcomes by objective truths. At times, these two principles militate against each other—as when the status quo results in outcomes that are inconsonant with truth. In the realm of political economy, Gabriel Kolko’s excellent book on the progressive era, *The Triumph of Conservatism* (Free Press, 1963), comes quickly to mind. Ironically, reforms that were seen as progressive were, in large part, the political triumph of a self-serving conservative status quo.

At their foundation, conservatives and classical liberals disagree over the nature of man—in particular, his perfectibility and the relationship between men as equals or as inferiors and superiors. Equality or hierarchy? Freedom or paternalism? Democracy in earnest or as a patina? The applications can be challenging. As an example, Buchanan points to charity as inherently hierarchical given the lack of exchange and the probable inability to reciprocate. Trying to reconcile classical liberalism with a Christian worldview, the best option seems to be to underline what the *giver* receives. Indeed, it is more blessed to give than to receive. Mission trips and service projects are familiar examples of receiving more than expected—and at times, more than what was given. Kristen Kraakevik provides a framework for this understanding by distinguishing between material and spiritual poverty (“The Two Faces of Moral Poverty,” in *The Remedy for Poverty* [1996]).

For the Christian, there is another dilemma. Christian theology points to the classical liberal assumption of equality—at least in terms of how we interact with each other through political means and ends. To reach that conclusion, however, classical liberals assume that values are fully subjective, an assumption inconsistent with a God of revealed truth. As Buchanan asks: “Can a person properly share the soul of classical liberalism without sharing the conviction that values emerge only from individuals” (57)?

There is also the issue of the application of these principles to Christian political activity. To borrow a question from chapter 2: “Are people capable of governing themselves?” A Christian would agree with the conservative: no, self-government has failed since Genesis 3. Nevertheless, a Christian might easily agree with the values and policy prescriptions of the classical liberal as well—that people should be treated *as if* they can self-govern, or at least, that they should be *allowed to* self-govern (as long they do not do direct and significant harm to others). This stance seems most consistent with the dignity of the human person.

In Buchanan’s view, there must be “a faith or normative belief in the competence of individuals to make their own choices based on their own internal valuation of the alternatives confronted” (57). Either that, or we must be willing to let people make their own (bad) choices—not condoning those choices but not working to prohibit them either. These are the sorts of issues with which I wrestle in my book, *Turn Neither to the Right nor to the Left: A Thinking Christian’s Guide to Politics and Public Policy* (2003). If a Christian should have conservative values, perhaps they should act like a classical liberal in terms of their political advocacy.

I offer three other points in closing. First, Buchanan is forceful in arguing that markets and morality need to walk hand in hand to produce an effective political economy—the Protestant work ethic and Puritan values; producing and preaching; freedom and responsibility. Buchanan criticizes those who thought that changed economic institutions and constitutional restraints would carry the day in the transition economies of Central and Eastern Europe. Without the “[Adam] Smithean parameters”—most notably, rule of law-market reforms were destined to fail or at least struggle mightily. “The ethics of the marketplace, of the classical liberal order itself, once lost, can scarcely be replaced by deliberately laid-on institutional reform” (38).

Second, Buchanan continues his familiar critique of those who practice economics as a scientific technique focused on efficiency (“normative eunuchs” [63])—and contrasts this approach with those who have been “born again” into a vision of classical liberalism. The reason for the impotence of the former is that it is a mastery of the basic principles of economics that is not matched by an understanding of their philosophical implications or any attempt to connect them to values.

Third, at least to a Christian, Buchanan is perhaps most intriguing when he draws parallels between the gospel and “the normative vision of classical liberalism.” (Ironically, “classical liberalism shares this quality [of vision] with its arch rival, socialism” [54].) In coming to this vision, he seems to favor the Damascus Road sort of experience.

If not, people are likely to embrace the correct policy positions but for the wrong reasons. Moreover, they will be less effective in communicating the vision—and the resulting policy implications—to others. Likewise, the reforms in central and Eastern Europe “were pragmatic rather than principled; the market seems to have won the game with collectivism by default rather than triumph” (62).

Underlining the importance of vision, he argues that the “every man his own economist” phenomenon renders scientific evidences less likely to persuade. Instead, it is “through an understanding of and appreciation for the animating principles of the extended order of market interaction that an individual ... may refrain from expressive political action that becomes the equivalent of efforts to walk through walls and on water” (55). Buchanan’s work continues to inspire his readers to explore and embrace those vital animating principles.

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