

WHY LIBERTY?

Keynote Remarks on the Legacy of Pierre F. Goodrich*
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by
W. B. Allen
James Madison College
Michigan State University

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All honor to Pierre F. Goodrich, who knew how to introduce moral authority into the deliberations of ordinary life without depriving individuals of the moral authority—indeed the moral responsibility—to chart their own courses!

The title of these remarks, “Why Liberty,” bears no accidental relation to the identical title of a short essay by Goodrich. I aim to dwell—to meditate—on the meaning of Goodrich’s essay, towards the end of justifying the conclusion I have just announced.

Before I take up the evening’s task, however, I want to join in the tributes now paid to the late Don Lipsett, who fully merits our recognition and respect. I can think of no more fitting way to express that recognition than to give voice to what, in my eyes, Mr. Lipsett has accomplished. In a word, for the Philadelphia Society and so many of us, he shepherded that slow but certain progress from the clumsiness of baby steps to the mature seriousness of gentlemanly vocation. It was 29 and ½ years ago I first appeared on a Philadelphia Society Platform. Two memorable events transpired then, each to make me blush.

First, and in that same program, the famous physicist Shockley spoke. After he completed his account of the genetic bases of racial differences in performance, my mentor, Dr. Jerry Pournelle, with whom I sat, rose in high-pitched righteous dudgeon, index finger seemingly planted in my head, saying, “How can you say that? Look upon my student here!” And so on, in terms which as emphatically urged me to seek precisely not to be seen as they effectively made his point. I wonder even now how I can laugh about the experience, which made me realize as a youth the capital importance of individuality.

The second event transpired during my own, subsequent presentation on the subject of the “New Left.” Remember them? Many of us learned to defend liberty by opposing them! Well, I was part of a panel, and on that panel also sat Dr. Harry V. Jaffa, whom I had not before met. I delivered remarks on the cogency of which I congratulated myself and took my seat. Then I listened to Jaffa. The experience I can not now describe, save to say, with Socrates, that I then knew that the only thing I knew, was that I knew nothing. Then and there was determined the yet open question, what I would do with my life. For this I thank Don Lipsett.

Pierre F. Goodrich had nothing to do with auto tires or blimps. You do not need me to tell you that. But I can not in these premises help but recall the hundred or so time I have lis-

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tened to Liberty Fund officers open a Goodrich seminar with an introduction to Pierre F. Goodrich that moved sedulously from that disclaimer to the inspiring story of Goodrich's entrepreneurial success and moral accomplishment. What has been so remarkable in this tremendous history—nearly twenty years for me—has been the constant freshness Liberty Fund officers have brought to the task, without ever bowdlerizing the story. Indeed, it shortly became for me a mark of the Liberty Fund officer's fitness for the office, how, rhapsode-like, they could give themselves up to the story of Pierre F. Goodrich.

Goodrich, of course, was a lawyer, educated as a youth at Harvard—if that be not a contradiction in terms. But, just as American was once a happier land, Harvard was once a home of learning. And so it arose that, despite a vocation in law, and businesses as diverse as newspapers, banks, and public utilities, Goodrich was above all a man of learning and conversation. And it was in the pursuit of this last—though never separated from his vocation—that Pierre F. Goodrich came to reflect on the necessary conditions for pursuing gentlemanly vocation and human society. His understanding and his genuine concern led him into the company of scholars and entrepreneurs who took to heart the growing signs of a crisis in their time—a crisis of ideas and institutions. In this context he came to dwell upon liberty—endangered liberty—and the idea of a society of free and responsible individuals.

At length, though, Goodrich came to see liberty as the key. He thought that frequent and disciplined conversation about liberty was called for, if there were to be any chance that imperfect men might bear any helpful influence in the crisis we faced.

It is no academic drill, therefore, to ask, “Why liberty?” What I have learned from Goodrich's essay, and his *Basic Memorandum*, and, indeed, from entering the life he advised, is that, while statism is the very image of the crisis, that one word, statism, is not a sufficient answer to the question, “Why liberty?”

In the opening of the essay, presented at a Mont Pelerin Society meeting in 1958, Goodrich took on the heady challenge of responding to the case for “expediency” in economic matters that “moral principles” can also inform such questions, and, he implied, perhaps sometimes decisively. Regarding the case for expediency he said:

This position usually deals with parts of a whole while ignoring the whole. At the very least, it implies an unwillingness to face the whole even as a theoretical premise.

This phrase, “a theoretical premise,” is, I think, our key. Goodrich thought the evidence of man's imperfection derived, not from a catalog of his sins but, from the evident incompleteness of his knowledge, existing simultaneously with a necessary quest for knowledge. The theoretical premise is the condition of the quest for knowledge, and any premature closing of the inquiry—including dogmatic denials of the potential for knowledge—result in confining man, for the purposes of guiding conduct economic or otherwise, with admittedly imperfect constructs.

Immediately after posing the question regarding expedience and moral principles, Goodrich asks, “Should man be free?” In the context, this does not mean politically free but morally free. Nor does morally free mean free from morality. It means rather the freedom to pursue counsels of morality.

He next asks what results from attempts to improve man by government, meaning in the context to oppose improvement by individual moral purpose to imposed improvements so-called at the will of another under the title of government.

So the state, and statism, emerge as a problem in the form of competition with individual and responsible efforts towards improvement.

Goodrich never depreciated the value and necessity of improvement—moral improvement—for human beings. He argues, rather, that imperfect as may be man's capacity for reason, it is still some capacity and in that title appropriate to the purposes of self-direction.

Moreover, insofar as man's incapacity is too large to warrant individual moral efforts, it follows that no man or group of men under the title of government can accomplish what imperfect individuals can not accomplish.

To underline his argument, Goodrich details leading characteristics of man—he reasons, he learns, he has attachments (as to family); he's moved by love, compassion, and fortitude, to envy, hate, and jealousy; he wills his conduct according to his attributes—in all which man acts under the impress of moral necessity.

Nor is it less true that the attributes which magnify man's imperfections—such as the inflation of power—lead him to act under the impress of moral necessity, though generally unhappily.

To act under the impress of moral necessity is to act toward some end, and when Goodrich questions whether economics is an end or whether liberty is an end, he prepares us for his conclusion.

To deny that economics is an end is possible only because economics is an instrumentality, a means to acquire things useful toward an end. But that does not distinguish economics from a liberty founded in imperfection. As I said earlier, the defense of liberty is the prevention of premature closure. If one held out the final possibility of discovering and living in truth, then liberty would be no less a means than economics.

Goodrich concludes, however, that “Maximum freedom is necessary,” since man is part of an ordered universe but, in his nature, unable to create the ordered universe within himself. Thus, man's imperfection is not a temporary state; it is his permanent state here below. His liberty, then, is his best state, not merely his most desired state. It is not the means to an end, it is an end (although simultaneously a means to the best that he is capable of).

In Goodrich's words: “I am not concerned with man's desire to be free. I am concerned with man's necessity to be free...”

It is this perspective which made it possible for Goodrich to offer what one might not have expected from the Socrates of American business, namely, a definition of the ideal government. He offered it in his *Basic Memorandum*, in these words:

The ideal would be decentralized, free, competitive, and representative political society limited to preventing force or intimidation over man.

Obviously, statism cannot survive this definition of the ideal government. Still, it is true that our crisis is too slight a regard for the necessity of liberty, even more than it is too fond a regard for the illusion of state security.

Still, to do justice to the fears of statism, which may have moved Goodrich less than it does some others, I offer what I take to be a fair but non-literal rendering of his view. In this view we can recognize the key to his conception of liberty, which serves to unlock the door on his moral reflections.

A practical, if metaphorical, expression of the problem Pierre F. Goodrich sought to deal with is the human, all too human, temptation to apply a collective scratch to what is an aggregate itch. The itch is the imperfection which affects each and every one of us in a particular way. In the aggregate, we all itch. But that is a mere summing up (an aggregation) of individual phenomena which can not operate to create a single phenomenon of general characteristics

Thus, whenever some imagine that, because we can count the totality of itches, we ought to be able to devise a single, general, and usually governmental scratch to relieve each and every itch in a single sweep of the legislative pen, we succumb to the fallacy of over-generalization, which accomplishes nothing more than the magnification of imperfections and hence the enlargement of our dangers.

Where each of us could handle his own itch with a timely applied personal scratch, none of us individually can shrink the blistering that results from the collective scratch. Where even in cases in which one might spontaneously serve the needs of another (the true meaning of “You scratch my back; I’ll scratch yours.”), none of us singly can lift the oppressive weight of governmental scratching from any individual back. Thus, by applying power where liberty would serve, we render ourselves helpless, whether to salve our own itching or to resist the excesses of power.

Liberty does not promise that we will not itch; liberty promises that we can manage the itches we ordinarily experience. Society, political society, ideally, would be an association in virtuous effort, not an association in power. That is the reason it is apt to say of Pierre F. Goodrich, that he introduced moral authority into the deliberations of ordinary life, without depriving individuals of the moral authority—indeed, the moral responsibility—to chart their own courses.