

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

James M. Buchanan

Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2005, 106 pp.

The main title of this book, of course, expresses James Buchanan's personal agreement with the famous 1960 essay by F. A. Hayek on "Why I Am Not a Conservative." Most of this small book, however, is better described by the subtitle. For this book is the only summary of Buchanan's important contribution to the philosophy of ethics.

Only the first and last of the 12 chapters were written specifically for this book, primarily to summarize the development of Buchanan's personal perspective on the book's two titles. The other 10 chapters are revisions of lectures that Buchanan has presented over the past decade. This small, dense book merits careful reading and reflection, chapter by chapter rather than at one sitting.

Buchanan, like Hayek, has long tried to distinguish his views as a classical liberal from those of a conservative—views that are often confused because classical liberals and conservatives have often been tactical allies. He differentiates these views primarily on the following four dimensions:

1. Classical liberals are open to consensual change; conservatives more generally support the stability of the social order.
2. Classical liberals assume a natural equality of humans; conservatives assume a natural hierarchy.

3. Classical liberals assume that individual responsibility is a necessary corollary of individual freedom; conservatives are more inclined to paternalism.
4. For classical liberals, value is subjective; conservatives are more likely to assume that there is an objective order of values.

For this reviewer, Buchanan's classical liberal seems more like an ideal type and his conservative more like someone we might meet in the real world.

Most of the remainder of this book makes the case for realistic utopias based on the ethic of reciprocity. Buchanan starts by rejecting the possibility of "a viable socio-economic-political-legal order in which the legal incentives are such that persons behave as Kantians quite independent of whether or not they feel ethically constrained" (p. 15).

Like Adam Smith, Buchanan emphasizes the importance of attitudes and rules of conduct in addition to the law—individual responsibility, manners, and a mutual commitment to the ethic of reciprocity. In that sense, the institutions of a liberal society are dependent on conservative individual values. And he concludes,

There is surely a minimal level of voluntary adherence to the whole set of norms implied by the Kantian precept—a level that must be reached by a substantial number of persons in the relevant social nexus (p. 16).

On this issue, he acknowledges a major difference with Gary Becker, George Stigler, and Gordon Tullock. Buchanan next builds the case that "for either effective political democracy or a market economy to function well, persons must confront interactions with each other under some presumption of reciprocity" (p. 27). The relations of people in these institutions need not involve caring, but only that strangers, those beyond tribal limits, be treated with norms of mutual respect:

In a sense, this shift reflects the limits of man's moral capacities. To treat other persons outside the tribe in accordance with norms of reciprocity—this was within the possible; to universalize the idealized tribal ethics of love—this was not (p. 38).

For some readers, Buchanan's comments about some other contemporary writers will be a surprise. Buchanan has high praise for John Rawls and his development of the concept of "justice as fairness" as the basis for the ethical rules among natural equals. On the other hand, he is moderately critical of the later writings of Hayek, along with those by George Stigler and Donald Wittman, for their Panglossian conclusions that the institutions that have survived a cultural evolution cannot be improved.

My major reservation about the philosophy summarized by Buchanan is his concept of the natural socio-political equality of all humans. Are we obligated to extend the franchise in all interpersonal relations to all humans on the assumption that they are capable and willing to follow the ethics of reciprocity? What about children? What about the mentally handicapped? What about those from a nonliberal society with no

experience with the rule of reciprocity in institutions larger than the family? What about those who have demonstrated by their own behavior that they are not committed to the rule of reciprocity and would most likely take advantage of those who are? How is the effective franchise of a liberal society determined, by whom and by what criteria? Buchanan makes little contribution to understanding these important issues.

My own judgment is that the case for a liberal society cannot be based on an assumption of the natural socio-political equality of all humans. Every person in a liberal society should be treated as having equal rights, not because he or she was born equal, but because that is what defines a liberal society. In that sense, the equality of all persons in a liberal society is a created equality, not a natural equality. Also in that sense, a liberal society is a created society—created by limits on the effective franchise, some social reenforcement of the rule of reciprocity, and some tolerance for those who do not follow this rule—and one for which a natural equality of all humans is neither necessary nor sufficient.

Buchanan has made a major contribution to understanding the necessary conditions for a liberal society and an important challenge to those who would advance an understanding of the sufficient conditions. In the end, he leaves us with a sermon:

The “system of natural liberty” is worth getting excited about . . . and it can be realized only if we treat it as potentially attainable. We lose our focus if we stay too closely with the scientific cocoon of observed reality. It is the imagined reality that might be which pulls us forward.

We must hold fast to the faith that human animals are uniquely capable of organizing themselves within social structures that make liberty, peace and prosperity simultaneously achievable. We must refrain from crude polemics, while continuing to teach, and to preach, the simple verities (pp. 70–71).

William A. Niskanen
Cato Institute