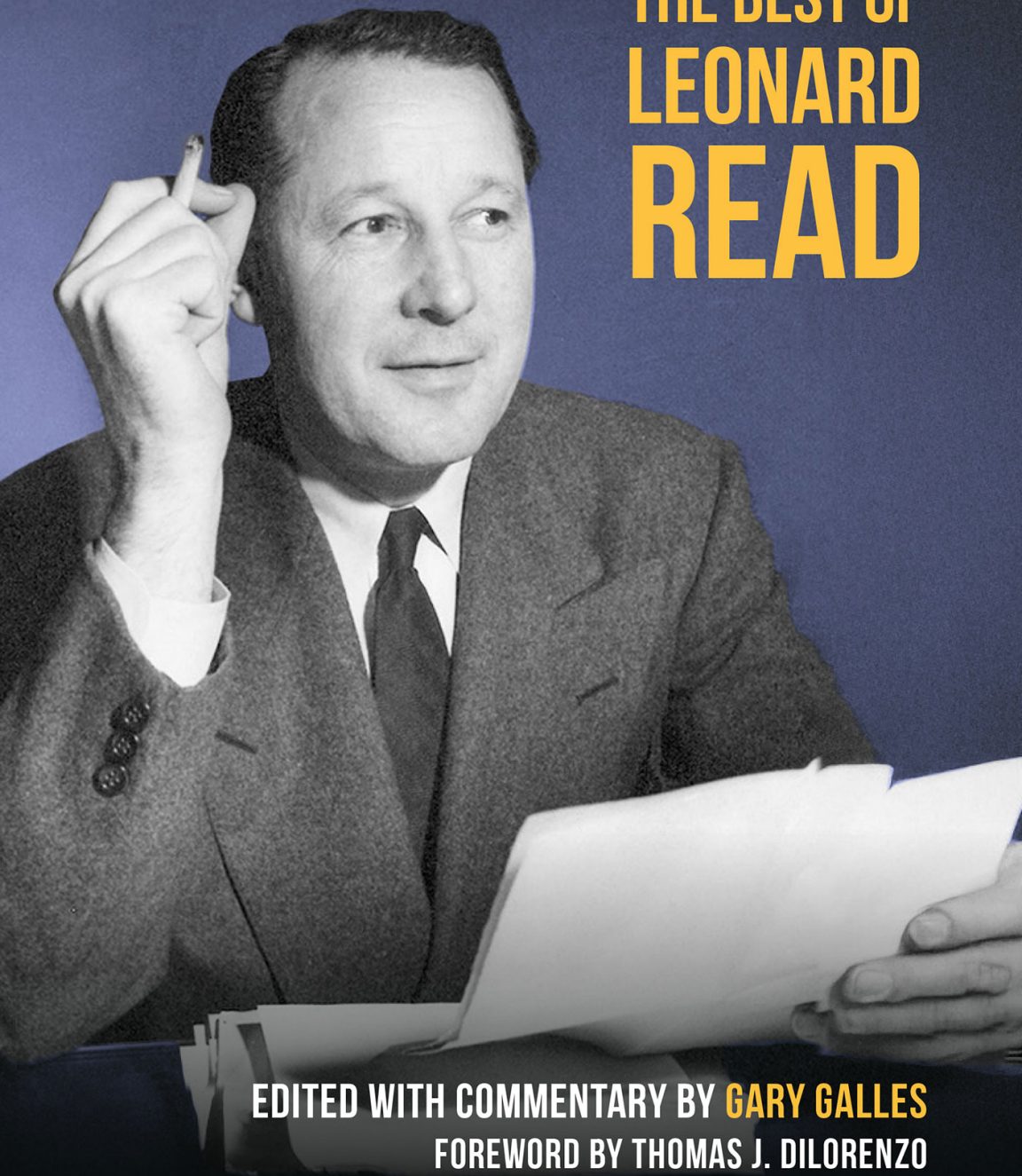
FREEDOM IN ONE LESSON

THE BEST OF LEONARD READ



EDITED WITH COMMENTARY BY GARY GALLES

FOREWORD BY THOMAS J. DILORENZO

Freedom in One Lesson

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"America must return to the liberty for which it was founded and achieved by our ancestors."

—**Philip Spicer, longtime Foundation for Economic Education board member*

Freedom in One Lesson

The Best of Leonard Read

Edited with Commentary
by
Gary Galles

Foreword
by
Thomas J. DiLorenzo

Mises Institute
Auburn, Alabama

To my lovely and tolerant wife, Marcia, who put up with me with grace during the entire lengthy process of working on this book.

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Appreciation is given to the Foundation for Economic Education for permission to use the Leonard Read articles that appear in this book.

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Foreword

The best introductory economics book ever written is Henry Hazlitt's *Economics in One Lesson*, which was first published in 1946 and is still as popular as ever. Although the title refers to "one lesson," Hazlitt disproves myriad economic superstitions and educates readers about the superiority of economic freedom to socialist "planning."

But there is much more to freedom than economics. Freedom is a philosophy of which economics is but one part. For this reason I, along with many others, have long seen the need for a companion to Hazlitt's economic primer that would explain the dangers of unrestricted government power to a popular audience—a book that could explain freedom in one lesson.

Thanks to Gary Galles, we now have the perfect companion to *Economics in One Lesson*, based on the writings of Leonard Read, the founder of the Foundation for Economic Education. Like his contemporary Hazlitt, Read had a golden literary touch that produced hundreds of articles and numerous books championing the cause of a free society over governmental tyranny and control. Gary Galles's commentary throughout the ninety-seven short chapters of this book elucidates the essence of Leonard Read's lifelong work of educating the world in plain English about the virtues of freedom, something that was urgently needed in the dark days of the postwar era and is even more desperately needed today.

Near the end of my forty-one years as an economics professor I started to ask my undergraduate students (junior and senior economics majors) if they had ever had an opportunity to read and discuss the US Constitution

in a classroom. In all those semesters, not a single student answered positively. When I sponsored a campus lecture by Professor Walter Williams titled "The Legitimate Role of Government in a Free Society," dozens of students thanked me for sponsoring a lecture on a subject they were totally unaware of. When I sponsored another campus lecture, this time by Congressman Ron Paul, several students approached me again to thank me and said they'd never heard a speech by a Republican member of Congress before. That's how censored the ideas of freedom are in today's university world and why books like this one by Gary Galles are so urgently needed.

A few topics that the typical college student is unfamiliar with, and which Leonard Read explains so eloquently yet clearly in this volume, are the morality of free markets; the immorality of government coercion; the difference between real justice and phony "social justice"; the deceptive language of government tyranny; why more-complex societies require *less* government control than less developed ones; why the poor need free markets more than anyone else; how millions of people all across the world routinely collaborate voluntarily to produce just about everything, from pizza and pencils to the most sophisticated technological gadgets and machines; and why socialism harms everyone (Bernie Sanders, call your office!).

We finally have the perfect twenty-first-century companion book to *Economics in One Lesson*, written in clear language that Hazlitt himself would admire. In 2023 the Mises Institute gave away one hundred thousand copies of Hazlitt's classic economic primer thanks to a generous donor. Perhaps someday soon a donor will help the Mises Institute give away one hundred thousand copies of *Freedom in One Lesson: The Best of Leonard Read*, a much-needed primer on the philosophy of freedom.

Thomas DiLorenzo
Auburn, Alabama

Introduction

Leonard Read is not a household name; in fact, not many Americans even recognize it. That is unfortunate, because, according to his biographer, Mary Sennholz, "Leonard Read was one of the most notable social philosophers of our time. His name will forever be associated with the rebirth of the freedom philosophy" (Sennholz 1996). Largely because of his efforts, as observed by Bettina Bien Greaves, "the freedom philosophy and free markets are now more widely discussed and more respectable" (Greaves 1998). Or, more succinctly, in Gary North's words, "the libertarian movement . . . can be traced to Read and Read's vision" (North 2002).

This book is not a biography of Leonard Read. There is already an excellent one available—Mary Sennholz's *Leonard E. Read: Philosopher of Freedom* (Sennholz 1993)—for those who wish to understand Read more fully. My purpose is to introduce or reintroduce some of Read's best sustained arguments, on behalf of what he called the freedom philosophy, to an audience that might be receptive to the principles of liberty.

Still, a very brief biographical background is in order to set the stage. Read was born September 26, 1898, in Hubbardston, Michigan. He grew up poor and extremely hardworking, in part because his father died when he was ten. His hard work and talent led him to become manager of the Western division of the US Chamber of Commerce in 1932 and general manager of the Los Angeles branch—the largest in the country—in 1939.

Leonard Read vigorously represented the Chamber of Commerce's policies. In 1933, he met with W.C. Mullendore, executive vice president of Southern California Edison, who had been critical of the Chamber's

positions. Read offered his defense of the Chamber's approach and rationale, but Mullendore eviscerated it. He then taught Read "his best lesson ever"—the core of the philosophy that Read would promote for the rest of his life.

Read, who was largely self-educated, wrote a book to express his philosophy. *The Romance of Reality*, published in 1937, made the case for liberty—that is, self-ownership and the voluntary arrangements it enabled—that he would continue to develop for more than four decades.

During his time at the Chamber of Commerce, Leonard Read became a crusader for freedom. But he could not wholeheartedly promote his crusade within the Chamber due to its positions. So, Read left at a sizeable financial cost to himself—"putting everything on the line, and risking everything" (Gresham 1968), as Henry Hazlitt put it in his contribution to *What's Past Is Prologue*, a collection honoring Read's seventieth birthday—in 1946, a time when the prospects for freedom in the world were bleak, to create his own organization to promote freedom. It was named the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE), which Gary North called "the granddaddy of all libertarian organizations" (North 2002) and which inspired the formation of many other free-market organizations (such as the Mont Pelerin Society, formed in 1947) and think tanks that have since arisen throughout the world. Lawrence Fertig, then vice-chair of FEE, describes Read's resolve: "When Leonard Read heeded the call of conscience in 1946 and organized the Foundation for Economic Education, even his libertarian supporters and friends took a dim view of his chances of success. At that time it was plain that the tide of Statism was only beginning to rise. Pessimism was rife and many feared that freedom would be engulfed by the advance of Socialism in the United States. . . . But Leonard Read . . . kept a flicker of the freedom philosophy alive in what seemed to be the dark age of statist advance" (Gresham 1968).

According to Bettina Bien Greaves, Read's purpose was "to counteract, through FEE, the anti-freedom, pro-socialist New Deal philosophy of post–World War II America. The problem was to reawaken in the people a belief in the morality of freedom. Since people cannot be forced to be moral, their ideas must be changed—through education. Read's whole life became devoted to this task, to free-market education in the broadest sense of the word" (Greaves 1998).

Years later, Read discovered that his approach reflected an insight from Albert Schweitzer's 1923 *Civilization and Ethics*:

> Civilization can only revive when there shall come into being in a number of individuals a new tone of mind independent of the one prevalent among the crowd and in opposition to it. A new public opinion must be created. . . . The existing one is maintained by the press, by propaganda, by organization, and by financial and other influences at its disposal. . . . This unnatural way of spreading ideas must be opposed by the natural one, which goes from person to person and relies solely on the truth of the thoughts and the hearer's receptiveness for new truth. (Schweitzer 1923)

In the role of not only FEE's founder and leader but also its heart and soul, Read traveled widely, giving speeches, producing an array of pamphlets promoting freedom, and participating in hundreds of seminars to defend and advance individual liberty. As Gary North put it, FEE's flagship publication, *The Freeman* (which I am proud to have written many articles for), "was the printed incarnation of Read's philosophy."

At FEE, Leonard Read wrote prolifically. In addition to speeches, presentations, and pamphlets, he wrote at least twenty-seven books (twenty-nine by some reports, depending on what is counted as a pamphlet and what is counted as a book). In fact, if there were a top-ten list for how many words someone had devoted to the cause of liberty, Leonard Read would likely be on it. The core of his message is described well by Bettina Bien Greaves:

> Read was a moral philosopher, not an economist, though his principles made him a pretty good free-market economist. He reasoned that if it is moral to respect the life and property of individuals, then it is immoral to violate their rights to life and property; if it is moral to deal peacefully with others, then it is immoral to use force, fraud, or threat of force to impose one's wishes on others; if voluntary transactions among private-property owners are moral, then to hinder or prevent voluntary transactions among willing traders is immoral. No one, neither private individual nor public agency, should take property by force or coercion from one person for the benefit of another. These principles led Read logically to believe in the morality of private-property rights, a free-market economy, and free trade, and to the conviction that government intervention that violates

> private property, hampers free markets, and interferes with free trade is immoral. His proverbial answer when asked how to solve any economic problem was: "Get the government out of it." (Greaves 1998)

For Read, the difference between what was permissible and what was not was simple. Anything that's peaceful (also the title of one of his many books) was permissible. The voluntary way was not only right but beneficial. But the use of force to coerce others against their will was wrong and immoral.

This book is an attempt to assemble an extensive collection of Leonard Read's best, most powerful sustained arguments on behalf of liberty, edited for brevity, with brief introductory remarks, organizational additions, and commentary connecting them to current issues. The arguments come from his books, articles, notes, and speeches, and some span multiple sources. They cover a wide gamut of subjects, including the rhetorical and logical abuses that are used to misrepresent liberty, the meaning of good government, the central importance of integrity (which Read viewed as the foremost virtue), the necessity of recognizing what is unknown, the importance of markets in revealing information that is otherwise unknowable in a complex world, the differences between wants and rights and between justice and social justice, whether immoral means can achieve moral ends, how the redistributive state harms every participant, and many more.

Read believed that nothing should stand in the way of freedom's power to change minds, including the morality and efficacy of "the free market and its miraculous performances" as the principle of social organization. This collection reflects, throughout, Jacob Hornberger's description of him: "Leonard Read took an absolutely uncompromising approach to the principles of freedom. He argued that man's purpose on earth, whatever it is, requires the widest possible ambit for human growth and maturation. Therefore, he believed, a person should be free to do whatever he wants in life as long as it is peaceful" (Hornberger 1991).

The selections here do not by any means exhaust Read's insights or his ability to turn a phrase. They are intended to stimulate serious thought and further reading and, I hope, to begin "infecting" more people today with his deep-seated commitment to liberty. That, after all, was one of Leonard Read's goals: to plant seeds of liberty, so that individuals, and thereby

society, could blossom to their fullest potential. Hornberger even describes Read and his associates as "freedom's 'Johnny Appleseeds.'"

Read's actions took real courage. Dan Sanchez recently wrote about how US Representative Frank Buchanan's Select Committee on Lobbying investigated FEE with a fine-tooth comb in 1949, only a few years after its founding, spending a week "rummag[ing] through FEE's offices" and summoning Read to appear before the committee (quoted in Sanchez 2023). FEE had criticized big-government policies, which Buchanan backed, for violating Americans' liberties. Buchanan stretched mightily the definition of lobbying to include criticism and thus bring the issue under his committee's sway.

Read's words in front of the committee demonstrated his unwillingness to back down from defending liberty, even in the face of powerful opposition. Rather than be cowed, he noted that to call FEE's work lobbying would require calling everything lobbying: "'Lobbying' . . . becomes synonymous with communication of thought—all thought. The Bible communicates ideas that might affect legislation. The words of every teacher, every minister of the gospel, of every person here or elsewhere, are communicated thoughts having possible effects on legislation. The list is endless" (quoted in Sanchez 2023).

Read proceeded to lay out how FEE was not a political lobbying organization by any sensible definition: "The organization which I represent is a non-profit research and educational institution. Its sole purpose is a search for truth in economics, political science and related subjects. It is that, and nothing more—an institution for learning" (quoted in Sanchez 2023).

The attack on Read and FEE for standing up for liberty did not result in the intimidation and silence Buchanan intended. As Bettina Bien Greaves summarized it, "The Buchanan hearings interrupted but did not deter FEE from its educational goal. The Foundation went quietly on its way trying to erode the rock of pro-government opinion with the written and spoken word" (Greaves 1996).

W.C. Mullendore, the source of Read's "best lesson ever" and a trustee of FEE, wrote a letter to Buchanan which clearly laid out a recognition of what was really afoot and how important the issue continues to be today: "Those who seek to extend the power of Government try to close the mouths of citizens who dare to oppose or inform public opinion on the dangers involved, and one of the most effective means of accomplishing

this subversive objective is to intimidate, through harassing investigations and smearing innuendos, the efforts of citizens to defend themselves. Your inquisitional and extremely burdensome demand for information which you have no moral right to demand is a most alarming example of the use of this means of intimidation" (96 Cong. Rec. H8339 (1950)).

Leonard Read's insights are both valuable and durable. They address issues that still bedevil liberty and the blessings that come in its wake. Friedrich Hayek, in *What's Past Is Prologue*, may have provided the most powerful endorsement of Read and his efforts that I have seen:

> I believe that what the Foundation for Economic Education, with Leonard Read at its head, and all his co-fighters and friends are committed to is nothing more nor less than *the defense of our civilization against intellectual error*. . . .
>
> . . . There is hardly anyone who at the same time sees the great issues of our time as intellectual problems and also is so familiar with the thinking of the practical man that he can put the crucial arguments in a language which is meaningful to the man of the world.
>
> If Leonard Read's position is probably unique today, it is precisely because he possesses both faculties. . . . I found not only that he knew much more than most of the rest of us about the opinions governing current policies, and was therefore much more effective in meeting the errors in them. . . . But I found also that he was a profound and original thinker who disguised the profundity of his conclusions by putting them into homely everyday language. (Gresham 1968)

Ben Rogge provides a further "amen" to Hayek's appreciation of Read's central role in both the defense and advance of liberty (reflected by the engraving on a silver bowl at the commemoration of his seventieth birthday: "Philosopher and Leader of the Free Society"): "Well may we be irritated when Leonard Read tells us again and again and still again that we must always look to ourselves, to self-improvement, not to reforming others, if we wish to serve the cause of freedom . . . but . . . somewhere in this world somebody is thinking or speaking or writing a word or taking an action under the direct or indirect influence of the life and teachings of Leonard Read. May

the rest of us be one part as effective and the world will again turn its face to freedom" (Gresham 1968).

I hope my attempt to identify and lay out Leonard Read's insights here is one part as effective as he was in advancing freedom. But given how far he is from public consciousness today, I am sure that anyone who prizes liberty will find here much new wisdom, although it is in fact not so new.

Gary Galles
Camarillo, CA

1.

Every Person Should Be Free

As the founder of the Foundation for Economic Education, Leonard Read was very much a leader of libertarian thought. It will be helpful to first discuss what that philosophy included, especially in an era of so much erroneous and misleading political information.

Read gives a thumbnail sketch of his view of liberty in "In an Ideal America" (Read 1954), published in the November 1954 issue of *The Freeman*. It consists of things that everyone should be free to do:

Every person should be free

- to pursue his ambition to the full extent of his abilities, regardless of race or creed or family background.
- to associate with whom he pleases for any reason he pleases, even if someone else thinks it's a stupid reason.
- to worship God in his own way, even if it isn't "orthodox."
- to choose his own trade and to apply for any job he wants—and to quit his job if he doesn't like it or if he gets a better offer.
- to go into business for himself, be his own boss, and set his own hours of work—even if it's only three hours a week.
- to use his honestly acquired property or savings in his own way—spend it foolishly, invest it wisely, or even give it away.
- to offer his services or products for sale on his own terms, even if he loses money on the deal.
- to buy or not to buy any service or product offered for sale, even if the refusal displeases the seller.

- to disagree with any other person, even when the majority is on the side of the other person.
- to study and learn whatever strikes his fancy, as long as it seems to him worth the cost and effort of studying and learning it.
- to do as he pleases in general, as long as he doesn't infringe the equal right and opportunity of every other person to do as he pleases.

When applied to themselves, few would disagree with the principles of Read's brief list, which incorporates thinking never abandoned in the millions of words he published thereafter. In that sense, they command a high degree of unanimity. But many would sacrifice the freedoms of others to give themselves added freedom (e.g., easing the constraints that scarcity imposes on them by increasing those constraints on others), which is why a general belief in liberty for oneself can coexist with massive impositions on the freedoms of other citizens. It is a touchstone of liberty that freedom must be universally applied. There is no liberty unless it is for all—an equality of freedoms.

Read goes on to summarize the purpose of his list. "The above, in a nutshell, is the way of life that the libertarian philosophy commends. It is the way of individual liberty, of the free market, of private property, of government limited to securing these rights equally for all."

The chapters that follow are intended to communicate, in his own powerful words, Leonard Read's case for that libertarian philosophy. His arguments should be considered with an open mind: most of us already believe in freedom, but our freedoms would expand if we just extended them by two words: "for all."

2.

A Confession of Faith

Since all we can change by our actions are the present and the future, attention typically focuses there. But the understanding and insight needed for such choices often requires looking back as well. Many today, too full of hubris to learn from the principles and illustrations given by the past, lead us astray due to their lack of insight. What history can teach us about liberty in particular is often not only ignored but routinely violated.

An excellent example of insightful reflection on liberty can be found in Leonard Read's "A Confession of Faith," from his 1971 book *Then Truth Will Out* (Read 1971a), which he describes as "an assessment of position on the freedom road." A half century later, when we are in many ways further from freedom, it is worth revisiting his thoughts.

> Perhaps the clearest way to identify one's politico-economic position—at least in broad outline—is to reveal his idea of the ideal, that is, what he means by civilization or by a civilized people. . . .
>
> . . . Civilization can mean nothing less than a society of civilized people. So how is a civilized person to be identified?
>
> A civilized person, according to my ideal, must recognize that man is at once a social and an individualistic being.
>
> Thus, he must not only be self-responsible but, at the same time, understand that he owes to others no infringements on their rights.
>
> In a word, the truly civilized person is a devotee of freedom; he opposes all man-concocted restraints against the release of creative human energy.
>
> The civilized person realizes how incorrect it is to think of freedom as synonymous with unrestrained action.
>
> Freedom does not and cannot include any action, regardless of sponsorship, which lessens the freedom of a single human being. To argue contrarily is to claim that freedom can be composed of freedom negations, patently absurd.

> Unrestraint carried to the point of impairing the freedom of others is the exercise of license, not freedom. To minimize the exercise of license is to maximize the area of freedom.
>
> In order to achieve this ideal, it is necessary that there be an agency of society—representative of the social side of man—which codifies the thou-shalt-nots, the taboos, the destructive actions and enforces their observation.
>
> The fact that society's agency—government—has a historical record of getting out of hand, of becoming destructive itself, only testifies to how far from civilized we are. It does not warrant discarding the idea of the ideal. . . .

Read's confession of faith in this passage is remarkably in line with Jeffrey Tucker's description of his work: "His one message: social and economic progress is only possible through freedom; all attempts to force change or progress through government are immoral and destined to fail" (Tucker 2013).

In his foreword to my book *Apostle of Peace: The Radical Mind of Leonard Read*, Jacob Huebert takes us back to Leonard Read's creation of the Foundation for Economic Education to advance liberty as well as forward to future prospects for what only liberty can make possible: "When Leonard Read created the Foundation for Economic Education in 1946, the prospects for liberty must have seemed bleak . . . there was no libertarian movement. . . . Read persevered, though, because he knew that libertarian ideas would only survive if the few principled people who believed in them deliberately kept them alive—and he knew that keeping them alive was the only hope for civilization" (Galles 2013).

I have heard friends in despair about the state's immense footprint that threatens to flatten the liberty that would represent civilization. And I sometimes feel the same way. But Read's faith in liberty and the hope it made possible for him can provide the same sustenance for us in similarly trying times. Liberty is the only hope for true civilization. Advancing it remains the best way to avert the tragedy that would accompany its disappearance.

3.

Twenty Facets of Freedom

In 2015, I published a book titled *Lines of Liberty*, which features quotes related to liberty from those who had been active and important in promoting it. To this day, one of my favorite quotes in that book is from John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*: "The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it" (Galles 2015).

Leonard Read opens the essay "Several Facets of Freedom," from his 1982 book *The Path of Duty* (Read 1982), with that quote. It drew my attention instantly, and I found Read's own opening lines an effective teaser to read more. "The quotation from Mill's famed essay, *On Liberty*, published in 1859, captures the essence of freedom. But there are many facets or aspects of the subject that merit elaboration."

Since Leonard Read is always broadening our understanding of liberty, its antecedents, its implications, and its power to benefit all of society, directly and indirectly, it is worth giving his reflections some reflection of our own. Consider what I view as the best passages from this essay that deal with liberty in relation to knowledge, excellence, influence, merit, competition, justice, and optimism.

> The recognition on the part of Socrates that . . . he knew he knew nothing—the first step toward wisdom—is, from the standpoint of human freedom and prosperity the most important recognition there is. . . .
>
> Each of us has an infinitesimal bit of knowledge—limited expertise. . . . When the market is free—no restrictions against production and exchange—the tiny bits of know-how possessed by millions of discrete individuals flow naturally and easily, contributing to the prosperity of each. This knowledge is in the market process itself, not in you or me or anyone else—the claims of the know-it-alls to the contrary notwithstanding. . . .
>
> It is in freedom that one's knowledge is put to best human use.

. . . It is not mere quantity of knowledge that counts, for even the most knowledgeable . . . has a mere glimpse of all that is to be known . . . excellence includes growth. . . .

When . . . the keynote . . . is excellence, freedom reigns!

. . . There is no action we take—good or bad—that fails to exert an influence on someone. Thus, the question: How influence others better to understand and explain the free society? The answer: Let anyone who would move mankind toward freedom *first move himself*!

. . . Never try to reform another; do not try to forcibly draw others toward your view. Instead, strive for that perfection of understanding and exposition which will cause them to do the reaching. . . .

Through the better personal practice of freedom may we attract others to share its blessings.

. . . Merit, if it be genuine, cannot be concealed . . . those who are seeking light, the ones who really count—will find true merit. It cannot be hidden for long. . . .

History reveals that contemporaries see more the man than his merit. . . . We have never seen . . . the greats of the past, but we can see and respect their merit. . . .

. . . Many among us insist that man is born for cooperation, not competition—as if these were antagonistic to one another. Such people . . . they fail to realize that cooperation is only a dream in the absence of competition.

Genuine competition implies rules, such as the rule of free entry. Free entry in any field of endeavor—the production of goods or the supplying of services or whatever—assures competition, each participant trying to excel.

Free competition among suppliers results in cooperation with customers. . . . When there is real competition among the bakers of bread, we customers decide whose bread we eat, that is, with whom we will cooperate.

The goal of competition in the free market is to serve customers better, according to consumer choice. The alternative is coercion. . . . And such a coercive society affords no incentive for self-improvement.

When there is competition, there are always those out front, setting the pace, leading the way. The effect of

this leadership? Others . . . are inspired to grow. Competition—trying to excel—is the origin of growth; it is the magnet that draws forth each man's best in the practice of freedom!

. . . Government, the political arm or agent of society, can have no higher aim than justice for one and all alike.

The Goddess of Justice is blindfolded; her concern is not with who you are but, rather, with how fairly and honestly one deals with one's fellowmen.

Justice conforms to such ideals as:

- The Golden Rule. . . .
- No special privilege for anyone.
- No violation of the right to the fruits of one's own labor or the right to act creatively as one chooses.

. . . A person may vigorously denounce the bad while failing to see the good. This . . . fails to advance the good. . . .

. . . Faith that the right will prevail . . . advances the good.

Few people in history spent more of their lives thinking about and acting to advance liberty than Leonard Read. Since he sees liberty as vitally important to both our individual growth and our social advancement, he considers everything he can think of that has a bearing on or a relationship to it. Those thoughts are worth reflecting on so that we too might grow in our insight and wisdom about liberty and thereby advance society.

4.

Dupes of a Politically Managed Glossary

American political electioneering has become unbelievably nasty and irrational. Campaigns are often reduced to name-calling and denigrating opponents. Ad hominem arguments and imputing guilt for association with an "ism" (e.g., dismissing someone for leaning conservative or libertarian or even for being supported by others with those sympathies) seem to be everywhere. Political epithets often almost completely crowd out logic in political discussion.

While such tendencies are particularly strong now, this problem is hardly of recent vintage. Only the degree, not the existence, is new. In fact, Leonard Read, in the opening chapter—"Debunking the Labels"—of his first book, *The Romance of Reality* (Read 1937), may offer the most incisive analysis of our "politically managed glossary" and its implications.

> No sober discussion of public questions is possible at this time without first clearing the thinking atmosphere of . . . politically managed labels.
>
> Few thoughts of others are accepted without first comparing colors, labels or isms. If these do not match, then the projector of a thought is obviously steeped in prejudice—he is a tool of the "interests." . . .
>
> By their opponents, New Dealers are called socialistic . . . [and] radical. . . . They call themselves liberal . . . [and] progressive. . . . To a New Dealer, an anti-New Deal Republican is at best a reactionary, shrinking from there . . . or he may be so low as to be termed a "tool of entrenched greed." . . .
>
> What chance has logic against these headwinds of hate? To criticize one's government is to invite oneself before the firing squads of the literary mercenaries. To sponsor or defend an economic principle to which current passions may be opposed is to ask for . . . an odious label. . . .
>
> . . . Conclusion: we are the dupes of a politically managed glossary.

> . . . Who likes to be called a Reactionary? And to be dubbed a Conservative has sadly become just a shade less nocuous. But to be called a Liberal is glorious!

Demeaning and flimsy attacks are not hard to find. During the 2012 election campaign, Chris Mooney (2012), in *The Republican Brain: The Science of Why They Deny Science—and Reality*, asserted that conservatives (more accurately, nonliberals) are not only scientifically illiterate but hardwired to ignore evidence that conflicts with what they want to believe.

Even more instructive than Mooney's Swiss-cheese "analysis" is an earlier study that Mooney relied on heavily: a 2003 article in the American Psychological Association's *Psychological Bulletin* titled "Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition." Backed by $1.2 million in federal research money, its authors assert that it provides an "elegant and unifying explanation" of political conservatism.

The authors find resistance to change at the core of political conservatism. While claiming to be nonjudgmental, they conclude that conservatism is "significantly linked with mental rigidity and closed-mindedness, increased dogmatism and intolerance of ambiguity, decreased cognitive complexity, decreased openness to experience, uncertainty avoidance, personal needs for order and structure, need for cognitive closure, lowered self-esteem; fear, anger, and aggression; pessimism, disgust, and contempt" (Jost 2003).

To get to their desired conclusions, the authors equate Hitler and Mussolini with Ronald Reagan as "right-wing conservatives because they all preached a return to an idealized past and favored or condoned inequality in some form." Unfortunately, their conclusions are not based on logic, and they overreach in their failure to make important analytical distinctions.

The core problem with these and similar conclusions is that "conservative," "liberal," "progressive," and other such labels are adjectives that get converted into nouns—isms—for political purposes. Adjectives, however, do not define themselves but modify something else. The consequence is that crucial questions such as "What is being conserved?" "In what ways are we liberal?" and "What do we consider progress?" are ignored.

Those are exactly the sorts of questions Leonard Read thinks carefully about, beginning with the historical evolution of political labels.

> Liberalism as a movement was born when the Magna Charta was exacted from King John. . . . It was born of an

era when governments were characterized by their despotism and economic practices lived under feudalism. This liberal movement, liberal because it was aimed at the liberalization of the individual from government coercion, progressed . . . over a period of five centuries, drew nearer to its ultimate realization—the American form of constitutional government and its relation to and observation of natural economic law.

Thus was experienced a complete transition from the philosophy that the individual is the servant of the state to the American philosophy that *the state is but the instrument and the servant of the individual.*

No small wonder then that the title Liberal is so avidly sought by political self-seekers whether they are liberals or not. Because of the centuries-old struggle for individual freedom which was Liberalism and which blossomed into full bloom as America, it is, of course, the smart thing to sail one's political ship under the liberal banner. . . .

A Radical is one who desires to uproot something. If he wants to uproot liberty he is anything but liberal. The liberal movement from the Magna Charta to The Bill of Rights was radical because it was a movement to uproot despotism, centralized political control and coercive economic practices. . . .

Present-day radicals have wrongly appropriated the word Liberal. Present-day radicals are bent on uprooting liberalism. They seek constitutional amendments so that bureaucracy, centralized governmental and economic control—the very essence of despotism—may be substituted for individual self-management and local self-government—the very essence of liberalism.

Reactionary . . . in King John's time . . . would have meant a return to all the practices of despotism and of feudalism. . . . However, it can have a narrower definition: a reaction against a contemporary event or events. Thus, a reactionary could be either a liberal or a conservative. . . .

A Conservative is one who desires to conserve something. If he wants to conserve liberty he is both a conservative and a liberal. If he wants to conserve a coercive system of government he is both a conservative and a coercionist,

> the opposite of a liberal. A conservative is one who wants to conserve the best of the old order and who is not in sympathy with radical movements. . . . Its meaning in relation to liberalism has become just the opposite of what it once was.
>
> The conservative of King John's time did not believe in the liberal movement but rather wanted to conserve . . . coercive monarchical government and the regimented feudal system. The conservative of today does not believe in the trend of the radicals back to centralized control or extreme government interference, which is the modern counterpart for the monarchical government and the feudal system against which our forefathers fought; but rather insists on conserving liberalism and the best of the order which found liberalism at its fullest.
>
> Thus today, a conservative is a liberal and what a radical once was; that is, he is fighting to conserve what the radical once fought to achieve. A radical today is no longer a liberal but what a conservative once was. He is fighting to achieve what the conservatives of old were trying then to conserve.

The analytical confusion Leonard Read sees resulting from such morphing labels is illustrated by our history. America was radical in its founding, although it sought to conserve what colonists considered their rights. It was liberal in that it tried to provide the broadest possible freedom for individuals from government coercion. And it was tremendously progressive in its recognition of inalienable rights for all (a far cry from the "conservative" divine right of kings) and united under a constitution intended to conserve that vision. So which label should we use to capture what America was?

Trying to restore or conserve a vision does not logically align one with every politician ever called conservative, including Hitler, Mussolini, and uncountable despots. To lump such disparate "conservatives" together fails to distinguish between those who want to conserve the power of governments to abuse their citizens and those who want to return to an approach that prohibits such abuses.

In the same way, to associate those who today call themselves liberals (or progressives, a label adopted by many liberals averse to certain consequences of liberal policies) with classical liberals is not only to confuse reality but to get it exactly backwards and to manipulate Americans by substituting the

good associations earned by what liberals once represented for the failings of current liberal and progressive policies. This confusion has elevated the image of liberals and denigrated the image of conservatives and libertarians. Leonard Read sees through the subterfuge.

> Those confusions . . . have their base in . . . the honeyed words . . . the fantastic romanticism and the soul-stirring oratory of politicians whose behavior is too far removed from statesmanship.
>
> These intriguing demagogues . . . basking under self-made halos of liberalism and humanism, have been largely responsible for the popular and false assumption that righteousness and radicalism belong one to the other, that radical thought has a monopoly on virtue. . . .
>
> A radical states his social objectives and, because they smack of righteousness . . . the masses too often leap to the indefensible conclusion that the methods proposed are equally efficacious. . . .There has developed the peculiar notion that LIBERAL, as today misapplied, is a synonym of virtue, moral rectitude, nobleness of intention and purity of character, and that CONSERVATIVE is synonymous with an evil course, immoral intent, inhuman practices and economic privilege. The radicals and the demagogues have done a good job of foisting their designs on the gullible public, of perverting the English language to their own ends.

The above was true in 1937 when Leonard Read wrote it and seems even truer today.

> It is not considered merely conservative but actually reactionary to favor a balanced budget, to argue for tax reduction, to urge thrift, to defend individual liberty, to protect the fundamentals of the Constitution, to demand the sanctity of contracts or to insist on a stable currency. To support the Constitution was once considered patriotic—it is now partisan.
>
> It is not considered radical but rather liberal to seek inflation, to abrogate individual rights, to usurp federally the prerogatives of local self-government, to spend beyond our capacity to pay, to peg prices artificially, to build bureaucracy, to stimulate class prejudices . . . [or] advocate . . . a Share-the-Wealth scheme.

> This misconception and mal-association of terms has developed many evils, not the least of which has been a serious destruction of faith in our responsible and competent leadership. The mere opposition of any measure which has been radical-labeled LIBERAL is of itself sufficient to nullify, in the public mind, experienced views of an opposer. Must not this oppositionist be a reactionary? . . . Such an oppositionist, so it is thought, cannot possibly be thinking of the human side, cannot be thinking of society in general. Have his opponents not stated or at least implied publicly and oratorically that they are the sole possessors of such Christian qualities and ideals? Have his opponents not called him dishonest and earmarked him as among the "money changers to be driven from the temple"? Has he not been publicly and officially generalized as a culprit? . . . Why should his advice be heeded?

The answer to that last question depends on the reason those who are labeled conservative oppose the new but unimproved liberal orthodoxy.

> Let us diagnose this person who dares not claim the liberal label and who by the radicals and self-styled liberals is called a reactionary in a voice that breathes of blasphemy.
>
> . . . This person may be a conservative because he wishes to conserve liberalism and the best of that order. He may be a conservative because he is opposed to the radicals who would uproot liberalism and take us once again to centralized, coercive and despotic governmental and economic control. . . . More likely than not . . . he is the first to want the elimination of vicious, immoral and unethical practices, but he would not burn down the stately mansion to kill the rats. He is properly a liberal for precisely the same reason he is a conservative.

Leonard Read's analysis puts a new face on conservatives denigrated for their supposedly closed-minded resistance to political change in contrast to liberals who define themselves as open-minded. Hesitation to impose sweeping new political changes may instead demonstrate recognition of the recurring failures of politically imposed change—a recognition shared by libertarians. As economist Paul Heyne once put it, "Economic theory often treats proposals for reform of the economic system so unkindly. . . . [It]

calls attention to the unexamined consequences of proposals for change. '*It won't work out that way*' is the economist's standard response to many well-intentioned policy proposals. Realism is not necessarily conservatism, but it often looks quite similar" (Heyne 1999).

After offering his analysis of America's "politically managed glossary," Leonard Read finishes by labeling himself in a way that makes clear just how damaging the substitution of misleading labels for actual thought has been.

> The writer has confessed to being a reactionary on one matter, a radical on another. Certainly, he believes himself to be a liberal and there are aspects of our former economy he wishes to conserve, thus giving him the tag of conservative. He wants a new deal from what we are now getting *but he looks in vain through the whole roster of party politics for an enunciation of principles he can wholeheartedly support*.
>
> The throwing off of these political fetters clears the atmosphere. There is room to think—to approach our problem objectively and without an inherited prejudice. The discussion, however, must not be dispassionate. It would hardly be decent for an American to be calm when he speaks of his country and thinks of the times.

America was founded to define our freedoms and defend them from government coercion. No genius is required to recognize the value of conserving that practice, which is at the core of what principled conservatives who share a classical-liberal heritage with libertarians believe.

Imputing such positions to mental rigidity and closed-minded dogmatism, rather than considering underlying principles and evidence, offers little more than fodder for liberals to deflect attention away from the unconvincing logic of their own proposals and abysmal real-world track record. Dismissing their objectors as unthinking or uncaring, modern liberals can feel superior and shift debate away from real analysis of specific policies. Their objections reduce to misrepresentations and distortions, combined with a variety of ad hominem accusations of nefarious 'isms,' and do not advance understanding.

This Orwellian distortion of our language uses false labels to keep public servants in power over a citizenry unwilling to think for themselves; but for those who want to build a truly better society, it offers only a foundation of quicksand.

5.

The Problem with "Left versus Right"

As a libertarian, I have long objected to being characterized on a political spectrum of left and right (there are studies, for example, that group libertarians with Republicans or conservatives on the right). In response to inquiries over the years about where I fit in that framework, I have taken to saying that my views are orthogonal (at right angles or perpendicular) to the spectrum. Since almost no one knows what "orthogonal" means, using it gives me a chance to explain why I fit in neither category.

I had been doing that for years when I came across Leonard Read's "Neither Left nor Right" (Read 1956a), from the January 1956 issue of *The Freeman*. Long before I arrived at my beliefs, Read was way ahead of me. He has a more complete view of the relevant history of left versus right and a more developed explanation.

> 'Why, you are neither Left nor Right!' This observation, following a speech of mine, showed rare discernment. It was rare because I have seldom heard it made. It was discerning because it was accurate. . . . Libertarians . . . are neither Left nor Right in the accepted parlance of our day.

Read then explains that while there is no directional relationship between left, right, and libertarian along a one-dimensional line, there is one on a two-dimensional plane. Libertarians want less authoritarianism of all sorts, not more of one brand and less of another. They believe that if liberty and authoritarianism are on a second axis, with liberty up and authoritarianism down, libertarianism lies above the left-right axis.

> 'Left' and 'Right' are each descriptive of authoritarian positions. Liberty has no horizontal relationship to authoritarianism. Libertarianism's relationship to authoritarianism is vertical; it is up from the muck of men enslaving man.

A more complete history of the evolution of left versus right than I have read anywhere else follows.

> There was a time when 'Left' and 'Right' were appropriate and not inaccurate designations of ideological differences. The

> first Leftists were a group of newly elected representatives to the National Constituent Assembly at the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789. They were labeled 'Leftists' merely because they happened to sit on the left side in the French Assembly.

Read then quotes "The First Leftist," an article by Dean Russell, a fellow libertarian traveler: "The Rightists or 'reactionaries' stood for a highly centralized national government, special laws and privileges for unions and various other groups and classes, government economic monopolies in various necessities of life, and a continuation of government controls over prices, production, and distribution."

While Read does not quote any further, more of Russell's article is worth incorporating here:

> The original leftists wanted to abolish government controls over industry, trade, and the professions. They wanted wages, prices, and profits to be determined by competition in a free market, and not by government decree. They were pledged to free their economy from government planning, and to remove the government-guaranteed special privileges of guilds, unions, and associations whose members were banded together to use the law to set the price of their labor or capital or product above what it would be in a free market. . . .
>
> The ideals of the Party of the Left were based largely on the spirit and principles of our own American Constitution. Those first French Leftists stood for individual freedom of choice and personal responsibility for one's own welfare. Their goal was a peaceful and legal limitation of the powers of the central government, a restoration of local self-government, an independent judiciary, and the abolition of special privileges. (Russell 1951)

Read notes the following:

> The Leftists were, for all practical purposes, ideologically similar to those of us who call ourselves "libertarians." The Rightists were ideological opposites: statists, interventionists, in short, authoritarians. "Left" and "Right" in France,

> during 1789–90, had a semantic handiness and a high degree of accuracy.
>
> But "Leftist" was soon expropriated by the authoritarian Jacobins and came to have an opposite meaning. "Leftist" became descriptive of egalitarians and was associated with Marxian socialism: communism, socialism, Fabianism.
>
> What, then, of "Rightist"? Where did it fit in this semantic reversal of "Leftist"? The staff of the Moscow apparatus has taken care of that for us. . . . Anything not communist or socialist they decreed and propagandized as "fascist." . . . Any ideology that is not communist (Left) is now popularly established as fascist (Right). . . .
>
> What, actually, is the difference between communism and fascism? Both are forms of statism, authoritarianism. The only difference between Stalin's communism and Mussolini's fascism is an insignificant detail in organizational structure. But one is "Left" and the other is "Right"!
>
> Where does this leave the libertarian in a world of Moscow word-making? The libertarian is, in reality, the opposite of the communist. Yet, if the libertarian employs the terms "Left" and "Right," he is falling into the semantic trap of being a "Rightist" (fascist) by virtue of not being a "Leftist" (communist). This is a semantic graveyard for libertarians, a word device that excludes their existence.

He then lays out a particularly important reason why the spectrum of left and right is something "libertarians should avoid."

> One important disadvantage of a libertarian's use of the Left-Right terminology is the wide-open opportunity for applying the golden-mean theory. For some twenty centuries Western man has come to accept the Aristotelian theory that the sensible position is between any two extremes. . . . Now, if libertarians use the terms "Left" and "Right," they announce themselves to be extreme right by virtue of being extremely distant in their beliefs from communism. But "Right" has been successfully identified with fascism. Therefore, more and more persons are led to believe that the sound position is somewhere between communism and fascism, both spelling authoritarianism.

> The golden-mean theory . . . is sound enough when deciding between no food at all on the one hand or gluttony on the other hand. But it is patently unsound when deciding between stealing nothing or stealing $1,000. The golden mean would commend stealing $500. Thus, the golden mean has no more soundness when applied to communism and fascism (two names for the same thing) than it does to two amounts in theft.
>
> The libertarian can have no truck with "Left" or "Right" because he regrets any form of authoritarianism—the use of police force to control the creative life of man.

Where do libertarians fit relative to the left-right political spectrum that is so commonly used?

> Libertarians reject this principle and in so doing are not to the Right or Left of authoritarians. They, as the human spirit they would free, ascend—are above—this degradation. Their position, if directional analogies are to be used, is up—in the sense that vapor from a muckheap rises to a wholesome atmosphere. If the idea of extremity is to be applied to a libertarian, let it be based on how extremely well he has shed himself of authoritarian beliefs.
>
> Establish this concept of emerging, of freeing—which is the meaning of libertarianism, and the golden-mean or "middle-of-the-road" theory becomes inapplicable.

Given that the term "libertarian" has important limitations (e.g., in addition to forcing it into a spectrum of left and right, many confuse it with "libertine"), it appears there is no ideal word for what libertarians stand for. But that is in large part because we have to undo a commonly shared but misleading framework and because enemies of liberty attack every word that might be used, from individualism to voluntarism. Our task requires more of a conversation than a mere shorthand term.

> What simplified term should libertarians employ to distinguish themselves from the Moscow brand of 'Leftists' and 'Rightists'? I have not invented one but until I do I shall content myself by saying, 'I am a libertarian,' standing ready to explain the definition to anyone who seeks meaning instead of trademarks.

6.

The Genesis of Extremism

In the last few years, Americans have seen an explosion of attempts to assign to "right-wing extremism" almost every problem and every person who objects to the policies of those now in power, including people who demand serious reasons for wearing masks, far-from-right-wing groups who riot, and members of Congress with a siege mentality in the "post-insurrection" period. But one of the most cogent explanations for the popularity of "extremism" is from almost six decades ago.

Leonard Read demonstrates his foresight in "Genesis of Extremism" (Read 1962c), from the April 1962 issue of *The Freeman*, in which he already understands today's name-calling, ad hominem attacks, and guilt-by-association innuendo and their connection to government overstepping any logically defensible role.

> Suppose you have a property. . . . Fearing that it might be despoiled, you employ a guard for protective purposes. . . . You contract with him to serve on behalf of that defensive force which inheres in your moral right to life, livelihood, and liberty.
>
> Should no trespassers or marauders appear, the guard remains alert but inactive. For defensive action is only a secondary action . . . brought into play only at the instance of someone else's aggressive action.
>
> Now assume that the guard becomes impatient with his inaction, that he despairs of his strictly negative role. Realizing that the self-same force he has been given to defend you can be used to take your life and livelihood, he turns on you, his employer. Contrary to your wishes and using your own weapons . . . your hired defender comes to dominate your life.
>
> Being a normal, self-responsible, self-controlling individual, you rebel at this immoral and unwarranted authoritarianism. . . .
>
> The guard, in the meantime, will have rationalized his actions to the point of self-righteousness with two lines

> of defense. The first will justify his own actions, "But I am doing this for the good of all." The second will belittle his critics by name-calling, "You are extremists."

But Read sees the need to make an important and overlooked distinction between, on the one hand, supposed right-wing extremists and, on the other hand, left-wing, socialist, and antimarket extremists.

> Extremism, as currently publicized, is aimed almost exclusively at "the extreme right" . . . [not] folks who sponsor federal urban renewal, or TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority] and its extensions, or compulsory social security, or foreign aid to socialistic governments, or whatever. By their definitions, none of them is "extremist." But they are, almost without exception, the ones who hurl the epithet "extremist" at those who do not agree with their authoritarian actions. . . .
>
> *What we are witnessing is an instance of action and reaction*. The genesis of the reaction is the action, and the origin of the current "extremism" is socialistic action.

Why was there less talk of extremists in America's past than today (excepting British accusations about rebellious colonists)?

> Let your memory or imagination take you back . . . to pre–social security days. A person who then said he did not believe in compulsory social security evoked no reaction at all. No one thought to classify him as belonging to "the extreme right."
>
> Then came compulsory social security, as socialistic as anything that falls under the definition. The authors of this legislation took the action. Reaction, in the form of dissent, followed. The actionists now call the reactionists "extremists." Had there been no socialistic action in the first place, there would be no anti-socialistic reaction now. Nor would the term, "extremist," in its present context, have come into usage.

What about those who position themselves against all forms of extremism but never apply the term to whatever they favor? "There is, now and then, a person who remarks, 'I deplore both the extreme left and the extreme

right.' To unmask this bit of nonsense requires only that it be translated: 'I deplore both action and reaction.' This makes no more sense than to deplore the thrust of a jet motor or the kick of a shotgun or the flight of a golf ball. Such remarks originate in thoughtlessness."

How should we react to socialistic government "innovations" that attack our rights and liberties?

> What ought to be considered, and carefully, are the varied types of anti-socialistic reaction evoked by socialistic action. The social actionists tend to disparage all reaction in one lump—"the extreme right."
>
> There are as many types of reaction as there are persons who react. There are those who do not react at all. . . . Others only mumble in their beards. These are allies of the socialists in the sense that they are inclined to "go along" with *what is*, regardless of its character.
>
> But among us are numerous dynamic reactionists. Some are calm and rational while others are volatile and emotional. Some proceed peaceably, others belligerently. Some expose the fallacies of socialistic ideas while others never rise above name-calling. Some confine themselves to educational methods, others to political devices. Some try to gain a better understanding and exposition of freedom principles while others set out to reform "the ignorant masses." Some see the fault in themselves and their own shortcomings; others think the socialistic debacle has its origin only in the Kremlin. Some do their work for freedom joyously while others work only in anger. Some . . . insist that "time is running out" and promptly hurry in the wrong direction.

Read sees a silver lining in the ominous threats to Americans from their government "servants": they may rouse us from our inattention so that we recognize them as inroads into American liberty and react the way our "extremist" founders did to violations of their inalienable rights.

> The current socialist action . . . may have some good in it. . . . Liberty . . . is never evoked without being provoked. The idea of liberty is always a response . . . a reaction. We rarely think we ought to be free, or think about it at all, until something shows us we are not free.

Rather than focus on opposition to "right-wing" extremism, we should recognize the extremism in those "left-wing" policies and politicians shrinking our liberty. Without that which the Left sees as "right-wing" extremism, what we seek to defend risks being completely steamrollered instead.

> Socialist action is a preface to the reaction. Without such action most consciousness of and attention to liberty might well fade out of existence. Until recently the idea of liberty was close to extinguished in the minds of the American people. Something had to provoke a new, dynamic, libertarian sensitiveness. . . . Reaction to [socialist action] is the great and rewarding dividend. May the reaction be marked by intelligence, integrity, good manners, determination; in short, may it take the form of an extreme intellectual, moral, and spiritual renaissance!

7.

Good Government

Well before Leonard Read founded America's first libertarian think tank in 1946, he had already thought deeply and carefully about the role of government in relation to individuals—a crucial question that, when ignored, leads to massive amounts of government-imposed damage on society. In "The Promotive Effects of a Good Government," from his first book, *The Romance of Reality* (Read 1937), you can find Read's central ideas about the few things a government could conceivably do well.

> A good government . . . is a servant *of all the people*. It takes no sides. . . . It cannot be a government that divides the population into classes . . . and then take the side of one group or the other, which at the moment appears to be the politically expedient thing.
>
> Insofar as a good government should have any economic interests, those interests should be directed to the people as consumers. *For the only common denominator in a population, economically speaking, is the consumer*. The object of a good government's economic affections should be the consumers and not groups and classes. In no other way can a government remain good. To shower its affection on a group or a class it must evidence a greater devotion to a group or a class than to the remaining groups or classes. . . . The government becomes relatively unfriendly to those groups to which the overflowing cup of friendship is not extended.
>
> A good government is one whose administrators must think of themselves only as representatives, as servants of the people, administering just laws, impartially and impersonally. They must never assume the notion that election or appointment to office places them in positions from where an undelegated, arbitrary attitude is permissible. They must never think, the minute they are in office, that they are the members of a new class, a different interest, that they must fortify their new positions by intrigues and favors to assure their permanency.

Needless to relate, it has been because of a violation of these political ethics, that contempt has developed toward "politicians" and, in turn, that "politicians" have assumed a vested interest attitude toward their offices and have felt compelled to use every device to perpetuate themselves . . . this politician-versus-people attitude. . . . A government cannot be good when its officers and administrators feel that their interests are different from those of the people, *any of the people*, they represent.

A good government recognizes that the best interests of the people are served when government keeps itself to the very minimum compatible with actual necessities. Such a government will keep a vigilant lookout for any possible excesses in its growth and cost.

A good government will scrupulously observe a disinterested attitude in the behavior and conduct between its citizens and will interfere only to assure fair play among them. It will assume the role of umpire and realize that that is as far as its function goes in this respect.

A good government . . . will not engage in competition with its citizens in affairs the citizens can possibly conduct themselves. . . .

In fiscal matters, a good government will set the example in economy, in controllable indebtedness and in the virtues of assets over liabilities. It will serve as a model in the high regard for sanctity of contracts. Government's obligations must be kept inviolable. Its taxing system will be as fair and as equitable as highly endowed and disinterested individuals can make it. The taxing power will be used for securing revenues only, not used to achieve a partisan-conceived social reform nor ever used to punish groups in political disfavor. . . .

A good government will resist to the utmost the efforts of any groups to use the government as a vehicle to their own ends. It will close the gate to the p*olitical means* as an avenue for man to satisfy his wants. A good government will leave man only the *economic means* through which to seek his material satisfactions, but will so perfect every instrument of government that success through the *economic means* will be facilitated and made easier for everyone.

A good government will be a government of laws and not of men. A people must never be subjected to a "Do this. Do that" order, insured in a government of men, impossible in a government of laws.

There is one point transcending them all in any definition of a good government. . . . A good government will set itself in such order that its citizens can best find an expression of their abilities and their virtues. The arena for citizen activity will be kept in good playing order, decently policed and fairly umpired. But the government, as government, will not have a concern as to who wins or who loses so long as the play has been fair and the rules of the game properly interpreted.

A notion contrary to this has been and is responsible for much of our trouble. People failing to win in the game of life, have turned to the umpire demanding favoritism in the interpretations of the rules and are now asking the umpire to carry the ball for their side. . . .The umpire finds himself hopping all over the field trying to help all sides to win. The dignity of the umpire becomes destroyed. He is a friend only when he is carrying *our* ball, an enemy when carrying the *other fellow's*. The contempt for the umpire must soon become general and then there will be no ordered arena in which the citizenry can operate.

If government can do our job for us better than we can, then the case for socialism is complete. Why not admit it, all join the government and perform all duties through government? . . .

If socialism is not the answer, and we will frankly admit it, then government has no business taking any sides of any group or class against any other group or class. . . . *To invite government interference in our behalf is to justify it in another's behalf,* which, sooner or later, must command national disaster. . . .A good government does not meddle in the legitimate affairs of any or all of its citizens. It merely keeps the arena in good shape for playing the game.

Certainly, no good government, as thus defined, would usurp any powers or prerogatives not specifically delegated to it by its citizens. As a matter of fact, it would frown on any delegation of powers, except in extreme emergencies,

that was not done after long and careful deliberation, and then only sparingly. One searches the pages of history in vain for examples of delegated power later relinquished—short of revolution. A good government would be the first to avoid this destructive trend.

Is a good government as here defined a mere dream? Very likely. Too few are willing to sacrifice their present unsupportable positions (little recognized as unsupportable) to contribute the effort necessary for its fulfillment. Too many prefer filching the magnificent edifice of our national being to a life of personal contributions that made the edifice possible.

. . . The law of the universe . . . says: "You will learn and adopt civilized conduct or you won't reap civilized results."

Is a good government complicated? No, it is simplicity itself. "Shoemaker, stick to your last," That's all.

Is it reactionary? Yes, in the sense that it calls for a restoration of the virtues, ideals and realities characterizing some of our earlier nationals. Yet, in another sense, the idea is extremely radical. Our government, and most of the other governments of the world, are headed in the other direction so fast they are afraid to stop. Somewhat comparable to the drunkard who fears to stop drinking lest the shock kill him. Perhaps it would. But in stopping there is hope. . . . It is radical to demand the overthrow of a present trend. . . .

. . . Government over-expansion with its economically enervating costs would cease. . . .

. . . Government mis-direction would no longer exist because a good government would not think in terms of groups and classes, and would play no favorites anyway.

. . . Government intervention into the fields of private enterprise would not be so much as entertained. . . .

. . . What is there actually promotive to be expected from a good government? For one thing, everyone (there could be no exceptions) would be forced to the use of the *economic means* to supply needs and to satisfy desires. There could be no other way, for the *political means* would be closed. Everyone would have to engage, in some manner,

in the production and distribution of goods and services. These being the only elements of wealth, everyone would be engaged in producing and distributing wealth.

Under a good government even the politicians would be included in wealth production, since a good government is essential to an ordered society, without which wealth production and distribution is impossible. Politicians, servants of the public interest, would be a very realistic part of the process.

As a rule man has produced his best when he has lived in a society where assurances have been given that he will be permitted to keep that which he has acquired, in a society where he has been guaranteed the fruits of his own labor. History demonstrates that man has been subjected to the predatory practices of government as well as by other men or criminals. A good government is a promotive factor because it engages in no practices that either unjustly absorb or take away from the citizen that which he has earned for himself. Thus, because of the behavior of a good government, man's energies are released to the extent he possesses energies.

There is one other basic characteristic to a highly civilized economy that can only be preserved under a good government and that characteristic is *economic voluntarism*. . . . [It] has been given a variety of titles: the competitive system, the system of laissez faire, private property, capitalism, the market economy and the profit system. . . .

. . . *Economic voluntarism*, under which so many other factors absolutely essential to economic welfare are nestled, can exist at its fullest only under a good government. It cannot exist at all under the opposite of a good government—the Totalitarian State. . . . Voluntarism diminishes, it fades, and with it the possibilities for material welfare, as governments approach Totalitarianism.

The United States, today, is the wealthiest nation all history has ever known, not because government created the wealth but because, during the past three centuries, several hundred millions of individuals, working competitively and cooperatively, have made contributions to a startling aggregate of wealth. They have left as their heritage

> to succeeding generations an amazing array of . . . essential instruments to future welfare.
>
> While, during these three hundred years, we probably have never had a 100% good government, we have had a government better than any other people have been able to devise. It has not been perfect nor can it ever be, but it has been nearer a neutral government and has interfered less than have the others. As a consequence, the spirit of the individual was unshackled. His energies were released. Initiative, resourcefulness, courage, inventiveness, confidence, specialized knowledge and individual objectivity fairly blossomed in this atmosphere of assured reward for demonstrated merit, all going to compose highly endowed individuals. They created the wealth. They gave society more than they used. *These free spirits, protected against the ravages of criminal individuals and predacious governments, built our national edifice. The total of their contributions made our national wealth.*
>
> We talk a lot about programs. "If you're opposed to this plan of government, what plan have you to offer in its stead?" is a common question. The inference is, "What alternate form of governmental planned economy have you to propose?" The answer is, "We do not want nor can the people prosper under *any* form of governmental planned economy."
>
> About all we want in the way of a plan is a plan that will get the people to understand what their relations to government should be, what the functions of government should be, and how this relationship can be adjusted to release to the fullest the potential productive capacities, the energies, the enterprising attributes, the virtues and the genius of the individual.

Politicians in power and their backers seem to always define good government as whatever they are trying to do, while challengers do the same for their program. But they both accept as an unthinking (or cynical) premise that those whom they favor deserve to gain at the expense of everyone else (why else are they so quick to demonize their targets?).

In contrast, Leonard Read sees that "a good government is a servant *of all the people*," an idea completely at odds with the current prevailing view

as well as our gargantuan government. "The best interests of the people are served when government keeps itself to the very minimum compatible with actual necessities." That minimum is what is necessary to "close the gate to the *political means* as an avenue for man to satisfy his wants" and "leave man only the *economic means* . . . [and] so perfect every instrument of government that success through *economic means* will be facilitated and made easier for everyone."

In sharp contrast to what we experience as subjects today, "even the politicians would be included in wealth production, since a good government is essential to an ordered society, without which wealth production and distribution is impossible." The rest could be safely left to "economic voluntarism," which allows peaceful cooperation between creative, productive individuals.

Many things in life change, but the principles of good government that exist to advance what the preamble to the Constitution called the general welfare have not. Leonard Read recognized those principles three-quarters of a century ago, when we were far closer to, though already distant from, that ideal. His insight provides a guide to what Americans will have to understand in order to realize that far better world, which will "release to the fullest the potential productive capacities, the energies, the enterprising attributes, the virtues and the genius of the individual."

8.

How Collectivism Makes Us Look Stupid

I have been surrounded by professor types most of my adult life—in college, in graduate school, and as a professor myself for more than four decades. But for much of that time, perhaps because I was brought up in a very blue-collar town, I have preferred to hang out with people who actually know how to do things rather than those who profess about that which they know virtually nothing. In other words, my history has taught me to be suspicious of opinions about economics and public policy from those who may be experts in some things but not necessarily those things.

I was struck by Leonard Read's "Making Fools of Ourselves" (Read 1962e), from the September 1962 issue of *Notes from FEE*, because it recognizes that most people are not competent to give valuable opinions on policy. As Friedrich Hayek, who became a close associate of Read's, expresses so notably in "The Use of Knowledge in Society," efficiently operating collectivism requires knowing what is beyond the ability of any planner or group of planners to know. Read takes this one step further, arguing that voters who want to give elected individuals collectivist powers over the rest of us face the same problem: many of their opinions and prescriptions are bound to be ignorant or misguided.

If, on the other hand, people are allowed to do "anything that's peaceful," while government is limited to ensuring that things are peaceful—that is, voluntary—then people can focus on what they really know and, through creative and cooperative efforts, accomplish as much as possible for one another. In talking about what they actually know, instead of what they don't know but feel compelled to have an opinion about, people would sound much more intelligent. During elections, predictable high points for people sounding stupid, Read's argument is especially worth considering.

> There is no statistical evidence that stupidity is on the increase. Yet, no observant person can help being impressed by the increasing division in our society between the self-anointed "experts" on the one hand, and the run-of-the-mill citizen on the other . . . which helps explain the diminishing esteem in which we admitted nonexperts hold each other. . . .

A mutual nonadmiration society is headed for trouble. . . . When by common consent our society is peopled with the unwise, we set the stage for the big, strong, "wise" man who will appoint himself as our ruler—for our own good, of course!

Is it that we are so much less wise than our Founding Fathers? In many ways, yes. But not enough to account for the low appraisal we currently have of each other's views. It is my contention that we are making fools of ourselves, submitting to and participating in a situation that engenders a bogus ignorance. . . .

First, reflect on the ideal society where government is limited to dispensing that type of protection for everyone which each has a moral right to exercise individually. Ideally, government has no more authority over or control of creative and productive actions than does a factory guard. Government at its best is but a refinement of guarding against fraud, violence, misrepresentation, predation; it is but the final man-made arbiter of liberty and justice for all—this and nothing more.

Second, let us take note of a universal characteristic among individuals: *no human being is all-knowing*. An individual, at best, has no more than a fragment of all knowledge, regardless of how well educated or politically powerful he may be. . . . But here is the significant fact: *the free society does not require that the individual know all there is to know about everything. If he knows and practices a few simple moral principles and has a mastery of his own profession or trade, he is adjudged an intelligent man, able to act intelligently within that tiny orbit which is his*. Thus, in a free society, we look for and find numerous individuals who are considered competent within their own frame of experience.

Third, observe what happens to these same individuals when the ideal, free society disappears and is replaced by democratic collectivism. See how an otherwise intelligent people can give all the appearances of being an ignorant people . . . by an ignorance artificially created.

The formula for an artificial ignorance is simple: Democratically elect, say, one thousand . . . each being reasonably intelligent within his own little orbit but each

being only dimly aware that he doesn't know much. Next, transfer individual freedom of choice and decision-making from the many to the few. Let the few have power over all aspects of life . . . give the few these powers over the many and the recipe for a bogus mass ignorance is complete. The millions, many of whom would appear intelligent in a free society, will, under democratic collectivism, appear stupid.

Why will many of these millions appear stupid? Because under the pressure of "responsible citizenship" they vote for those who would control all aspects of life. Therefore, to vote "intelligently" they must try to know a great deal about all the affairs of human existence that the candidates for rulership—the few—are striving to control. . . .

. . . Not being all-knowing . . . they must appear ignorant whenever they wander beyond their own tiny realms of knowledge, that is, whenever they presume to discuss and pass judgment on problems about which they know nothing at all.

Few of us . . . when living under democratic collectivism, are able to resist talking about and feigning authoritative judgment on every subject within the domain of the collectivistic rulership. Further, when living in this kind of a society and when taking positions on matters about which we know nothing, our know-nothing positions tend to side with the collectivistic. Led thus astray, we have no time to understand and practice freedom! Is it any wonder that we appear ignorant to each other?

Is there a way out of this trap? There is, indeed! . . .

Humility suggests that each freedom devotee become conscious of how little he knows and of how little is known by those who would be or are our rulers. From this acute consciousness stems a healthy skepticism: no one knows how to make socialism work. Aware of this we then recognize that organized force (government) has only a strictly negative role to play, that all productive and creative actions belong in the realm of men acting freely, privately, voluntarily, competitively, cooperatively. Thus fortified, we cannot be drawn into the acceptance of a socialistic premise and, without such an acceptance, we will no longer pontificate

> on what socialistic conduct or procedure should be. . . .In other words, we'll have faith in freedom. . . .
>
> . . . George Washington made a good suggestion: "Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair. The event is in the hand of God." Let each of us adhere to such a standard, quit making fools of ourselves, and have faith that the event will occur.

It is worth noting that Leonard Read's argument goes beyond the fact that faith in freedom would make us seem smarter. The fact that we would be free to think, build, create, and voluntarily cooperate on the basis of the very different things we as individuals actually understand would serve us far better than collectivism, which is based in confusion and backed by coercion. If the proof is in the pudding, such an arrangement would prove we were actually smart.

9.

Libertarian Socialism

In "I Don't Know," an essay from his 1965 book *The Free Market and Its Enemy* (Read 1965b), Leonard Read comments on how socialistic ideas can bribe or intimidate would-be libertarians or free-market advocates into silence or acquiescence. "In the absence of skilled spokesmen, freedom disappears."

> Any individual who has become aware of the free market and its miraculous performances must realize that its opposite—socialism—is growing by leaps and bounds. This growth, at the moment, is not so much in formal takeover (nationalization of the modes of production) as in political control and the intellectual acceptance of control; socialism, ideologically, is now American doctrine. This is to say that socialism is not yet as thoroughly embedded in practice as it is in theory—but the acceptance of the theory is the preface to inevitable practice. Performance in the world of practical affairs follows on the heels of prevailing ideas.
>
> . . . Socialistic ideas are becoming so popular that countless "free enterprisers" are either "getting on the band wagon" or "running for cover" . . . forsaking their role as spokesmen for freedom.
>
> . . . In the absence of skilled spokesmen, freedom disappears. . . .
>
> Making the case for the free market requires a great deal of dedicated homework and learning, among other things, how *not* to give the case away . . . [including the attempt] to explain how socialism, once installed, can be made to work better than at present. . . . [This] is impossible of realization . . . [and] the attempts themselves do the libertarian rationale a distinct disservice.

To illustrate, Read tells a personal story about a FEE seminar group invited to Venezuela. "A successful businessman (one of our hosts) had once been asked by the government to head this socialized [hotel chain] operation. Thinking that socialism might be made to work were he in charge,

he accepted the challenge. When he discovered that these hotels required 150 percent occupancy just to break even, he resigned. Had he known that socialism, by its very nature, can never be made to work, he would have been spared that waste of his energies."

How does he come to the conclusion that "socialism, by its very nature, can never be made to work?"

> Socialism may be defined as the state ownership and control of the *means* of production and exchange and/or the *results* of production and exchange; but what, really, is it in simple essence? It is a forcible intervention into exchange processes, a power wedge between the willingness of buyers and the willingness of sellers, a coercive interference with what some persons want that other persons are willing to grant. *Socialism, in the final analysis, amounts to the frustration of willing exchange by people who are unaware of how little they know.*
>
> [In a voluntary] exchange . . . nothing [is] involved but a willing swap. . . . The know-it-alls, however, with their police force, insist that a social interest is involved, that the exchange cannot be made without a penalty. . . . To the extent that this transaction is socialized . . . to that degree is the will of two peaceful parties frustrated.
>
> How can frustration be made to work? How can frustration be manipulated into harmony and increased production? Can any interference with peaceful, willing exchange, regardless of who does the interfering, do other than wreak havoc?

Because socialistic policies frustrate voluntary arrangements, substituting what are at least in part involuntary arrangements, such approaches perform poorly. Sometimes, that poor performance leads to thinking that if only there were better managers—say, libertarians who know better than to trust coercion to advance our liberty or well-being—the problems could be solved. But Read has a good, thoughtful response. "Many antisocialists, unhappy with the outcome of socialized activities, feel that these could be improved were they, rather than other know-it-alls, in charge. So they seek election or appointment to the government boards of such activities, under the impression that this is one way to strike a blow for freedom. . . . They can, when in charge, *do more of what they want done* with other people's money

than would be the case were other know-it-alls in charge. But this is no libertarian accomplishment; it's only a substitution of one group's know-it-all-ness for another's."

Further, falling for the "better managers" trap undermines the powerful case for liberty over socialism. "When those of a libertarian bent set out to make socialism work better, whether by managing the activity or by their endorsement of legislation which would modify the socialistic details, they tacitly approve the socialistic premise and thereby abandon their own case for the free market. They forswear all fundamental argument against the socialistic premise because by their actions they acknowledge that it could be improved were they themselves framing or administering it. 'Socialism, were I it's manager, wouldn't be so bad.'"

So, what is Read's advice?

> The student of liberty, if he is not to get off the track, must hope and work for the restoration of the free market and a government restored to its principled role of keeping the peace. Then let him peacefully keep in character by leaving socialistic activities to those who aren't yet aware of how little they know. . . . Why should libertarians absolve the socialists by becoming a party to their unworkable measures? . . .
>
> The aspiring libertarian, if he has made the first important step in progress, understands that he does not know how to mastermind the life of a single human being. He concedes that there is an order of creation over and beyond his own mind, that this order works in diverse and wondrous ways through billions of minds and that he should not in any way abort these miracles.

For Leonard Read, this means that "the accomplished student of liberty acquires a faith that men, when free to try, will perform miracles, a faith extrapolated from experience"; therefore, abetting government acts that undermine the freedom of individuals to discover and implement improvements in voluntary and peaceful ways—and thereby to enable miracles—is inconsistent with libertarianism. In a world of ever-expanding government restrictions, that is serious food for thought.

10.

Thanksgiving and the Essence of Americanism

Thanksgiving plays an important role in the views Americans have of themselves and their heritage. The mere fact that it comes with time off from work and school cannot by itself explain the great number who travel to celebrate with those they care about. But our understanding is not very deep unless we recognize that the Pilgrims started from a communal or communist system and then moved to a system based on the right to private property because they were starving, something we celebrate even in this woke time.

We have even more cause to celebrate that change today than the pilgrims did then because systems based on private property prohibit violations of one another's rights and provide the greatest arena for competitive advancements.

An excellent way to review the essential contributions of the past to the bounty Americans now celebrate (even during what are hard times for many) is to consider an excerpt from Leonard Read's traditional opening address for seminars at the Foundation for Economic Education (Read 1961b), first delivered sixty years ago.

> The American people are becoming more and more afraid of, and are running away from, their own revolution. . . .
>
> . . . Our Pilgrim Fathers at Plymouth Rock . . . began the practice of a principle held up by Karl Marx: . . . from each according to ability, to each according to need—and by force! . . .
>
> . . . [But] these communalistic or communistic practices were discontinued . . . because the members of the Pilgrim colony were starving and dying. . . .
>
> . . . During the third winter Governor Bradford got together with the remaining members of the colony and said to them, in effect: . . . "We are going to try the idea of 'to each according to merit.'" . . . He enunciated the private property principle . . . nothing more nor less than each individual having a right to the fruits of his own labor. . . .

Governor Bradford records that "Any generall wante or famine hath not been amongst them since to this day."

. . . This private property principle . . . [led] to what I refer to as the real American revolution. . . .

. . . The real American revolution was a novel concept or idea which broke with the whole political history of the world.

Up until 1776 men had been contesting with each other, killing each other by the millions, over the age-old question of which of the numerous forms of authoritarianism—that is, man-made authority—should preside as sovereign over man. And then, in 1776 . . . the fraction of one sentence stated . . . the new idea . . . "that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." . . . This is the essence of Americanism. This is the rock upon which the whole "American miracle" was founded.

It . . . [denied] that the state is the endower of man's rights, thus declaring that the state is not sovereign. . . .

It is one thing to state such a revolutionary concept as this; it's quite another thing to implement it—to put it into practice. To accomplish this, our Founding Fathers added two political instruments—the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. These two instruments were essentially a set of prohibitions; prohibitions not against the people but against the thing the people . . . had learned to fear, namely, over-extended government.

[America] more severely limited government than government had ever before been limited in the history of the world. And there were benefits that flowed from this severe limitation of the state.

. . . There wasn't a single person who turned to the government for security, welfare, or prosperity because government was so limited that it had nothing on hand to dispense, nor did it then have the power to take from some that it might give to others. To what or to whom do people turn if they cannot turn to government for security, welfare, or

prosperity? They turn where they should turn—to themselves.

. . . All over the world the American people gained the reputation of being self-reliant.

. . . When government is limited to the inhibition of the destructive actions of men—that is, when it is limited to inhibiting fraud and depredation, violence and misrepresentation, when it is limited to invoking a common justice—then there is no organized force standing against the productive or creative actions of citizens. As a consequence of this limitation on government, there occurred a freeing, a releasing, of creative human energy, on an unprecedented scale.

This was the combination mainly responsible for the "American miracle," founded on the belief that the Creator, not the state, is the endower of man's rights.

This manifested itself . . . as individual freedom of choice. People had freedom of choice as to how they employed themselves. They had freedom of choice as to what they did with the fruits of their own labor.

But something happened to this remarkable idea of ours, this revolutionary concept . . . the people we placed in government office as our agents . . . discovered that the force which inheres in government, which the people had delegated to them in order to inhibit the destructive actions of man, this monopoly of force could be used to invade the productive and creative areas in society. . . .

. . . The extent to which government in America has departed from the original design of inhibiting the destructive actions of man and invoking a common justice; the extent to which government has invaded the productive and creative areas; the extent to which the government in this country has assumed the responsibility for the security, welfare, and prosperity of our people is a measure of the extent to which socialism and communism have developed here in this land of ours. . . .

There was a time, about . . . [1840], when the average citizen had somewhere between 95 and 98 percent freedom of choice with each of his income dollars. That was

because the tax take of the government—federal, state, and local—was between 2 and 5 percent of the earned income of the people. But, as the emphasis shifted from this earlier design, as government began to move in to invade the productive and creative areas and to assume the responsibility for the security, welfare, and prosperity of the people, the percentage of the take of the people's earned income increased. The percentage of the take kept going up and up and up. . . .

. . . Has there ever been an instance, historically, when a country has been on this toboggan and succeeded in reversing itself? . . . The only significant one took place in England after the Napoleonic Wars.

England's debt, in relation to her resources, was larger than ours [in 1961]; her taxation was confiscatory; restrictions on the exchanges of goods and services were numerous, and there were strong controls on production and prices. Had it not been for the smugglers, many people would have starved!

. . . There were in England such men as John Bright and Richard Cobden, men who understood the principle of freedom of exchange. Over in France, there was a politician by the name of Chevalier, and an economist named Frederic Bastiat. . . .

Bastiat was feeding his brilliant ideas to Cobden and Bright, and these men were preaching the merits of freedom of exchange. Members of Parliament listened and, as a consequence, there began the greatest reform movement in British history.

Parliament repealed the Corn Laws, which here would be like repealing subsidies to farmers. They repealed the Poor Laws, which here would be like repealing Social Security. And fortunately for them they had a monarch . . . who relaxed the authority that the English people themselves believed to be implicit in her office. She gave them . . . a permissive kind of freedom. . . . Englishmen, as a result, roamed all over the world achieving unparalleled prosperity and building an enlightened empire.

This development continued until just before World War I. Then the same old political disease set in again. . . . It has many popular names . . . such as socialism, communism, state interventionism, and welfare statism. It has other names such as fascism and Nazism. It has some local names like New Deal, Fair Deal, New Republicanism, New Frontier, and the like.

If you will take a careful look at these so-called "progressive ideologies," you will discover that each of them has a characteristic common to all the rest. This common characteristic is . . . a rapidly growing belief in the use of organized force—government—not to carry out its original function of inhibiting the destructive actions of men and invoking a common justice, but to control the productive and creative activity of citizens in society. . . .

As this belief in the use of force as a means of creative accomplishment increases, the belief in free men—that is, men acting freely, competitively, cooperatively, voluntarily—correspondingly diminishes. Increase compulsion and freedom declines. Therefore, the solution to this problem, if there be one, must take a positive form, namely, the restoration of a faith in what free men can accomplish. . . . You are given a choice: either you accept the idea of the Creator as the endower of man's rights, or you submit to the idea that the state is the endower of man's rights. . . . We have forgotten the real source of our rights . . . the free market, private property, limited government philosophy with its moral and spiritual antecedents. . . .

. . . The real problem . . . is developing a leadership for this philosophy. . . .

. . . [It] requires that an individual achieve that degree of understanding which makes it utterly impossible for him to have any hand in supporting or giving any encouragement to any socialistic activities . . . however disguised. People reject socialism in name, but once any socialistic activity has been Americanized, nearly everybody thinks it's all right. . . .

. . . Read the ten points of the Communist Manifesto and see how close we have come to achieving them right here in America. . . .

> The philosophy of freedom is at the very pinnacle of the hierarchy of values; and if you wish to further the cause of freedom, you must use methods that are consonant with your objective. This means relying on the power of attraction.
>
> . . . Freedom is an ore that lies much deeper than most of us realize. . . . A great effort is required to dig up this ore that will save America. And where are we to find the miners?
>
> I think we will find these miners of the freedom ore among those who love this country.

11.

Freedom and the Fate of Nations

Most people who have been exposed to economics in an academic setting have heard of Adam Smith's invisible hand, but few really grasp its importance. Smith uses the image to explain how people who only intend their own gain are led to benefit others through the need for voluntary agreement in market arrangements.

The invisible hand is a metaphor for the social coordination and other benefits that are unintended byproducts of the pursuit of self-interest under appropriate rules of the game, which are, in a nutshell, the rules that protect private-property rights.

Leonard Read grasps the concept of the invisible hand, but in his claim that the inviolable right to private property is a practical means of ensuring mutual freedom in society, he extends the unintended gains of the invisible hand beyond market arrangements to all of civilization. Read's insight, articulated in a chapter titled "A Role for Rationality," from his 1969 book *Let Freedom Reign* (Read 1969b), deserves careful consideration.

> The observation that those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it generally refers to the rise and fall of nations and civilizations. My contention is that history does have certain lessons to teach:
>
> 1. The rise of civilized societies is the result of freedom, and freedom is a state of affairs stumbled upon and, in no instance, a premeditated, rational design.
> 2. The explanations for societies in ascendancy have generally been false—the ascent has been attributed to organizational gadgetry rather than to freedom.
> 3. The decline and fall of civilized societies has usually been attributed to some organizational error rather than to overorganization. Rarely has a lack of freedom been assigned as the cause.
> 4. To avert a decline and fall requires rational analysis and an understanding of what it is about freedom that accounts not only for ascendancy but for the maintenance of the

ascendant position. *Be rational in this respect or look for the cycles of history to repeat themselves*!

Professor F.A. Hayek, who has a scholarly sense of what is historically significant in human behavior, observes:

> Modern man prides himself that he has built his civilization as if in doing so he had carried out a plan which he had before formed in his mind. The fact is, of course, that if at any point of the past man had mapped out his future on the basis of the then-existing knowledge and then followed this plan, we would not be where we are. We would not only be much poorer, we would not only be less wise, but we would also be less gentle, less moral; in fact we would still have brutally to fight each other for our very lives. We owe the fact that not only our knowledge has grown, but also our morals have improved . . . not to anybody planning for such a development, but to the fact that *in an essentially free society* certain trends have prevailed because they made for a peaceful, orderly, and progressive society. (italics added)

It is my belief that each praiseworthy society—Sumer, Athens, Carthage, Rome, Venice, Florence, Kiev, England, America—has not flowered from a rationally designed scheme for social felicity but, rather, has bloomed from a state of freedom come upon unwittingly, inadvertently, accidentally. . . .

History's greatest creative outburst took place in the United States of America where freedom—private ownership, freedom in transactions, willing exchange, government limited to keeping the peace—was more nearly approximated than elsewhere or at any time. The correlation between freedom and creativity appears to be unassailable.

Was the American miracle premeditated, a rationally designed structure of society? Far from it! The people who came to this land were fleeing from old-world tyranny. They had little else in mind than to get away from their shackles. Europeans who migrated to America observed

that the more a government ruled the actions of men the worse off they became. Their conclusion: That government is best which governs least. Hardly a refined theory!

What did these settlers do? They limited government more severely than governments had theretofore been limited. An examination of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights reveals 46 instances of "no" and "not" directed against governmental action; in short, hands off! And there they stood, freer than man had ever been before.

This American action did not occur as a rational prognosis of better things to come, for these forebears of ours hadn't the slightest idea of what lay in store for them except that each could be his own man. They chose freedom for freedom's sake alone; hang the economic or other consequences.

If we could gather all the facts, I believe that every instance of freedom has come about as a last resort. Authoritarians had tried everything in the way of controlling the creative actions of men; everything had failed and their bag of tricks was exhausted. What to do when such a dead end is reached? . . . Nothing! And there stood the citizens free to act creatively as they pleased.

Freedom in every historical instance has been brought on by desperation; there simply wasn't anything else to try. And then followed the miracle which was attributed far more to organization than to freedom.

. . . People the world over observed in America something most unusual. For the first time in history, every individual, regardless of station or status, was his own man. Each could employ himself as he saw fit, each retain the fruits of his own labor, each decide his form of worship; in a word, freedom of choice in all aspects of life was as open to one as to another. Foreigners heard of an explosive creativity and an unprecedented prosperity—a new world in which the lowliest laborer might rise to an affluence greater than that of lords and dukes!

The upshot? There began the greatest migration to a single country ever known. And something more: curious individuals, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, as well as governmental commissions from many nations, came here

to discover the magic that had been loosed. If they could find it, they themselves could experience the miracle. Or, so they thought.

What was the message most of them took back to their countries? What was the magic word? It was *organization*. They focused their eyes on the Constitution and the Bill of Rights featuring limitations of governmental authority, separation of powers as between the legislative, judicial, and executive branches, and so on. Simple enough; merely duplicate these forms of political organization and then any society can experience the social and economic progress evident in America!

And many nations did just that, patterning their new Constitutions after our own. . . . [But] "organization" is not the magic word. . . .

The American Constitution was no more than a written record of what the preponderant leadership at that time believed. It was a recording of the thoughts, sentiments, and principles that made up their code and that they were capable of practicing. This document merely put their ideals in writing. The Constitution did not produce their high qualities; it was the other way round: their qualities produced the Constitution. And that's all a Constitution can ever be; it's an effect, not a cause. Instead of paying obeisance to our Constitution, we ought to be probing and admiring the thoughts of those who wrote it.

Seen in this light, it becomes clear why other nations gained nothing by copying our Constitution. Copying is useless unless the thinking be up to such a standard. And when our thinking falls below that of our Founding Fathers, our Constitution, like copies of it in other lands, becomes but a scrap of paper. To expect anything more is like expecting a rogue to change his ways by pinning on him a "good conduct" medal.

. . . Something much more than organizational gadgetry accounts for the good society. Social remedies are not to be found in writing a new Constitution, by amending the present one, or by adding laws upon laws. We must keep in mind that a good society and good organization

are not two different sets of data to be correlated; they are simply two different aspects of the same set of facts.

Of all the foreign investigators who sought an explanation of the American miracle, Alexis de Tocqueville came closer to the right answer than anyone else known to me. . . . "[. . .] America is great because America is good. When America ceases to be good, America will cease to be great."

. . . Of one thing I am certain: there can never be a good society except it be comprised of persons distinguished by righteousness. . . .

I return to Professor Hayek for the key ingredient: ". . . *in an essentially free society* certain trends have prevailed because they made for a peaceful, orderly, and progressive society." For it is only in an essentially free society that certain trends have the possibility of prevailing: self-responsibility, improved morals, a passionate striving for intellectual excellence, a will to overcome obstacles, an energetic enthusiasm turned inward to self-improvement, an abounding entrepreneurial spirit, competition, and free pricing.

. . . No manner of organizational gadgetry can make a great society out of unworthy people. Further, a nation of great people can suffer considerable imperfection in organization and still experience an outburst of creativity. . . .

I wish only to stress that creative outbursts have a direct correlation with freedom; that freedom exists in the absence of coercive control of creative activity and that the limitation of power, whenever it has occurred, must be attributed to happenstance rather than to organizational design. And, finally, there never has been nor can there now be any avoidance of a decline in our Western societies short of a rational analysis of why societal ascendancy depends on freedom. These points, I believe, are what history has to teach; and the failure to apprehend them is not only an invitation for history to repeat itself but an assurance that it will.

The reason that creativity and social felicity can flourish only in an essentially free society is an enormous wisdom or knowledge that cannot otherwise be tapped. My own term for this is Creative Wisdom. This, I am insisting,

is not only the most important but, also, the most overlooked point in political economy.

. . . Reflect on freedom's opposite, an essentially authoritarian society where the dictator or a committee of commissars—bureaucrats—plan and dictate. . . . On what knowledge does such a society operate? According to the authoritarian design, only on . . . the dictator, and his conforming henchmen—infinitesimal knowledge! Were the authoritarian design carried out to the letter—no more knowledge in operation than he and his bureaucracy possess—all would perish. . . .

Actually, what happens in all statist arrangements is a leakage of free human energy. Independent knowledge persists in showing itself. It is this leakage of knowledge which alone accounts for any and all accomplishments generally credited to statist arrangements. For it is self-evident that it is only a free, volitional action that can possibly be creative. . . . All knowledge in society stems from freedom trying to operate, and only when this fact is overlooked do people come to believe that an authoritarian society has possibilities worth exploring. It is the knowledge that leaks out despite the Plan that accounts for all the accomplishment, but people see only the Plan and mistakenly attribute the accomplishment to it.

Now, reflect on the knowledge that emanates from an essentially free society. It is a luminosity so brilliant that, by and large, we are blinded not only to its genesis but even to its part in our lives. The blessings it confers are taken for granted as is the gift of sunshine—automatically our daily due.

. . . We will either discover how to give this luminosity—Creative Wisdom—a rational analysis; or we will lose it—that is, history will repeat itself.

The enormous knowledge that emanates from an essentially free society develops by reason of the fact that in such a society no person imposes his will by force upon any other person. . . . When no one can restrain anyone else in his creative actions, then knowledge, ideas, insights are free to emerge from many millions of potential sources. Creativity, in this event, has no external inhibition! . . .

> . . . Freedom taps this richest of all the world's resources and assures us that society will have the use of all the knowledge there is or ever will be!
>
> The knowledge freedom makes available to all of us is unimaginably greater than the knowledge that can issue from those who would rule others, for they suffer the greatest ignorance of all: an unawareness of how little they know. . . .
>
> Those of us without such deep understanding are unaware of any impressive alternative to your or my rule. To ever so many people, it's only a question of who shall rule. . . . Overlooked is the fact that your knowledge or mine is infinitesimal, that not enough knowledge exists in any discrete individual to rule a single person, let alone a society. Also overlooked . . . is the almost unknown alternative, strikingly impressive, once it is apprehended. That alternative is the aggregate of all the knowledge issuing in literally trillions of tiny bits from all who live, which I refer to as Creative Wisdom.

Leonard Read recognizes that freedom is the foundation of civilization—what he calls "praiseworthy society." In other words, civilized society, which is so complex that it defies our ability to plan either its creation or development, is solely the unintended outgrowth of freedom. Thus, civilization rises and falls together with freedom. The erosion of freedom by public servants who continually substitute their necessarily limited knowledge for the "Creative Wisdom" of a free society coordinated by voluntary arrangements does not bode well for our future. But we can change our prospects by recognizing the irreplaceable role of freedom and restoring it, thereby unleashing the "luminosity" that has been increasingly dimmed.

> Rationality does not require that I comprehend *precisely* how trillions of tiny bits of knowledge form into Creative Wisdom in order to affirm my certainty that this is a phenomenon essential to life. Finally, Creative Wisdom functions only in freedom. To avoid another disastrous decline and fall, we must not only know that freedom is essential but must try to know why it is essential. This is the lesson that history teaches.

12.

Liberation on the Subject of Freedom

There are many phrases one could use to describe Leonard Read's positions, which he adhered to consistently. But one accurate description is that he was adamantly devoted to the liberation of people from their misunderstandings on the subject of freedom. One of the best examples of this comes from his essay "Liberated!" (Read 1962d), from the March 1962 issue of *Notes from FEE*.

The essay begins with Read's question—"How long have you been interested in this philosophy [of freedom]?"—to a graduate student "who obviously wanted to know more about the subject of freedom." Her response: "I have now been *liberated* for six months." Read then discusses why he found her answer "sensational in the clarity of what it revealed." "This conjures up a picture of a person imprisoned by a host of myths, superstitions, fallacies. Then, in a flash, by some unforeseen encounter, she was freed of them all and launched on a new road to enlightenment. Liberation, as she used the term, suggested a sudden illumination, a breakthrough to a higher level of consciousness: 'Whereas I was blind, now I see.'"

What was the source of the blindness?

> Reflect on the preliberation notions. In many cases we find lying at their root the primitive doctrine that man derives his rights to life and liberty from some man-concocted collective—the tribe or the state. This doctrine was frankly expressed in the old divine-right-of-kings thesis, an egotism few present-day statists have the nerve to admit.
>
> The logical sequence to such a premise is the conviction that the state is responsible for a people's welfare, security, prosperity. And if the state can grant a man's rights, it can also retract them; that is, it is in control of rights. Freedom of choice as to how one employs himself or what he does with the fruits of his own labor is expanded or contracted according to the caprice of those who have gained command of the political apparatus. Wage and price controls, government education, public housing, federal urban renewal, government power and light, socialized medicine, government mail delivery, social security, federal subsidies to any and all

> groups who think themselves in distress, protection against competition, progressive taxation, and a host of other socializations or nationalizations are simply extensions of the premise that man's rights derive from the state.

How does one finally see the reality unleashed by freedom? Read compares this liberation to a seed, which, much like the mustard seed in the Bible, produces amazing results.

> Out of this confusion emerges . . . the moment of liberation, the break-through! An idea or fact or observation . . . suddenly comes to life, opens a crack, and the light floods in. It's something like a seed embedded in a crevice of solid granite, the forces of its growth slumbering but, when released, stronger than its rock-bound prison. Its destiny undeniable, the seed splits the stone and is freed to friendly and life-giving elements.
>
> Once this opening has taken place, old ideas take on a different perspective and new ideas come into one's comprehension. Relegated to the junk heap of myths is the absurd premise that man derives his rights from a political apparatus. . . . Rid of this bedeviling notion, a new premise insinuates itself into consciousness: Men are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among them the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

He then quotes Frédéric Bastiat's summary of this point from his justifiably famous *The Law*.

> We hold from God the gift which includes all others. This gift is life—physical, intellectual, and moral life.
>
> But life cannot maintain itself alone. The Creator of life has entrusted us with the responsibility of preserving, developing, and perfecting it. In order that we may accomplish this, He has provided us with a collection of marvelous faculties. And He has put us in the midst of a variety of natural resources. By the application of our faculties to these natural resources we convert them into products, and use them. This process is necessary in order that life may run its appointed course.
>
> Life, faculties, production—in other words, individuality, liberty, property—this is man. And in spite of the

> cunning of artful political leaders these three gifts from God precede all human legislation, and are superior to it.
>
> Life, liberty, and property do not exist because men have made laws. On the contrary, it was the fact that life, liberty, and property existed beforehand that caused men to make laws in the first place.

What follows from stripping away the illusion that the state determines our rights and the burdens we bear from them? What if our rights are inherent and given by God?

> One logical deduction from the premise that man's rights are endowments of the Creator is that each individual is an end in himself, that is, each person owes allegiance, above all else, to his Creator. No other person or set of persons, however organized, has any moral sanction to interfere with this Creator-man relationship; no person is warranted in compelling any human being to serve merely as a means to his own ends. When anyone violates this relationship, he is saying, in effect, "I am your god."
>
> It follows from the above premise that manmade laws can be no more than codified social taboos or a set of prohibitions, for the purpose of preserving inviolate the Creator-man order. All true law finds its origin and its limitation in such rights of protection as inhere in each of us. How can we tell what these rights are? Merely ascertain if universality can be applied to them. Do I, for example, have a right to defend my life, livelihood, liberty against those who would take these from me? Only if the same right may rationally be conceded to everyone else. Can it be? Obviously, yes! Now, then, do I have a right to take the life, livelihood, liberty of another? Only if the right of murder, theft, slavery may rationally be conceded to everyone else. Can it be? Obviously, no!
>
> It follows logically from this premise that government may properly do no more than perform the defensive function. All productive and creative actions are then freed of any man-restraint, flowing solely from the Creator-man order.
>
> When an individual is liberated, he becomes aware of the miracles which come to pass once creative human energy has no organized, man-concocted force standing

> against it. An unwavering faith in free men expels any lingering, misplaced confidence in little men playing god.
>
> The omnipotent state—authoritarianism—will not be liquidated except by liberated individuals. It is only they who go in search of freedom's answers.

What will the search for freedom's answers reveal? "The state can no more assume responsibility for one's welfare, security, prosperity than can a committee of baboons. Indeed, the responsibility for self is no more transferable than is breathing. Yet, people can be lulled into this false notion and, as a consequence, forgo attention to self-responsibility, becoming purposeless and useless. . . . We need more liberated individuals."

Read then asks, "How can we liberate them?" and offers some good advice.

> The individual not yet liberated is no more educable as to the free market, private property, limited government philosophy than you or I are educable on subjects in which we have no interest. Thus, it is patently absurd to scold or rant at them, to be impatient, to regard them as not bright, to try poking our ideas down their necks. Such tactics will only send them scurrying. . . .
>
> Work naturally; make freely available such insights as you possess, but do not entertain any notions about setting someone else straight. Go only where called, *but qualify to be called*. The few within your orbit who are susceptible to the freedom philosophy will find you out. We need never worry about that, only about our own qualifications. In this manner we will liberate as many minds as will open to our own keys. . . .
>
> . . . And you will have struck another blow for freedom!

Those of us who can see the wonders freedom can accomplish want more people to see them. That is the only way the growing constraints on freedom might be sufficiently recognized and opposed. Leonard Read knew this, but today we face an even more daunting task. Every law enacted to redistribute wealth from one group of people to another creates a special interest group that opposes freedom. But to be consistent with liberty, all we can do is learn how to achieve liberation on the subject of freedom. Read offers a great deal of light on that path.

13.

Freedom: A New Vision, Not Old Hat

The media is constantly promoting "new and improved" ideas to replace "old hat" ones about freedom and open competition. But the visions held by their protagonists are not in touch with reality.

Leonard Read wrote about this decades ago in "Freedom: A New Vision," from his 1975 book *Castles in the Air* (Read 1975a). The trend was not as pronounced then as it is today, but Read's vision—clearer and more promising than the usual authoritarianism disguised as utopianism—is still worth serious reflection.

> . . . Why speak of freedom as a vision? Freedom . . . is . . . an ideal way of life more ardently to be hoped for than seriously expected in our time. . . .
>
> And why the adjective "new"? . . . our opponents . . . continually refer to this way of life as "old hat" or words to that effect! Troubles in society, brought on by authoritarian mischief, they lay to freedom. . . .
>
> . . . Freedom as it has been approximated, first in England and then in the U.S.A., is the newest and most remarkable politico-economic achievement in the world's history. . . . The structures for this free way of life were erected in 1776: the simultaneous appearance of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* and the Declaration of Independence.

The new, "progressive" ideas in the air are actually old, regressive, tyrannical, and tired. That their proponents can't even see that tells us how much we can trust their knowledge and judgment. "The issue is between two opposed ways of life. Our opponents' way is the older, as old as mankind: authoritarianism in its numerous forms . . . contrary to natural law and prevent life from flowing. The newer is freedom, featuring unfixed, improving, flowing, creative concepts."

Only freedom allows us to grow and achieve our fullest potential.

> Anyone who believes as I do that man's earthly purpose is growth in awareness, perception, consciousness, has no choice but to side with individual liberty—freedom—and to look with disfavor on all forms of authoritarianism. . . .

> Human improvement or growth stems from an exercise of the faculties. . . . Exercise is possible only as we are free to work on our individual selves and is diminished to the extent that we are worked over by others.
>
> Growth without liberty, that is, without the freedom to exercise our faculties and to discover our creative potentialities, is out of the question. Given the goal of individual growth, authoritarianism is an utterly absurd way of life. . . .
>
> . . . The freedom philosophy . . . differs from most philosophies in that it does not prescribe how any individual should live his life. . . . It allows freedom for each to do as he pleases—live in accord with his own uniqueness as he sees it—so long as the rights of others are not infringed. . . . This way of life commends no controls external to the individual beyond those which a government limited to keeping the peace and invoking a common justice might impose. Each individual acts on his own authority and responsibility. . . .
>
> . . . It has nothing in it at all that calls on me or the government to run your life.

The immense personal and social benefits of freedom should make it the touchstone—the ideal—around which we consistently orient ourselves.

> Unless we have the ideal in our minds, we have no compass, no way of knowing in which direction our efforts should be pointed. Knowing the ideal is the first step in down-to-earth practicality. I define the ideal—freedom in a refined state—as no man-concocted restraints against the release of creative human energy. . . . Its practice [is] an aspiration. In the economic realm we call it the free market.

To understand the ideal of freedom, we must know not only what it is but also what it is not.

> Not at all surprisingly, most people think of the free market as private enterprise. This, however, is not what we mean. All sorts of wholly objectionable enterprises are private: piracy . . . embezzlement, hi-jacking . . . [and] all governmental interventions that favor some and injure others.
>
> The free market is so little trusted because so few are aware of what it is. Thinking of ourselves as if we were a free people leads us mistakenly to conclude that our present

> hodge-podge of intervention is a manifestation of the free market. Consequently, we imagine that a free and self-responsible people would behave no better than do the majority of us today. But what we mean and what most people think we mean are poles apart!

Read then turns to an interesting analogy between the light spectrum and the political spectrum.

> Political-economic philosophy . . . is loosely analogous to the light spectrum. . . .
>
> . . . Substitute the long and short arms of government for the long and short wavelengths. At the extreme left we observe the long arm of government reaching into nearly every phase of human existence—authoritarianism. . . . Then as we move to the right on this spectrum, the arms of government become shorter, reaching into fewer and fewer facets of life. Finally, and comparable to the ultraviolet lying just beyond the visible spectrum—we would find the arms of government so short that they could not reach into and have control over a single creative activity—government no more than a peace-keeping arm of society. This ideal can only be imagined . . . beyond the right end of the visible spectrum where schemes to manage the lives of others would be nonexistent. . . .

To understand why freedom offers the best prospects for the greatest possible human growth and development, Read focuses on its ability to utilize knowledge that no one person alone can grasp, even if those who would dictate to others pretend to.

> *The market possesses a wisdom that does not exist, even remotely, in any discrete individual.* For instance, because you cannot imagine how mail would be delivered ever so much more efficiently than now if turned over to the market, never . . . let your faith falter by reason of your infinitesimal know-how. To claim that the free market has a wisdom a million or billion times your own is a gross understatement. . . .
>
> . . . From whence comes this enormous knowledge that does not remotely exist in any person? . . . The miracle of the market . . . when men are free. . . .

> What we must bear in mind is that the sole generative force at the human level stems from individual human faculties: intuition, insight, inventiveness, perception, awareness, consciousness, and the like. . . .
>
> To the extent that the free market prevails, to that extent is economic life featured by free entry and competition. . . . In addition to the heritage of the ages . . . these features enormously stimulate and bring to the fore the genius potentially existing among our contemporaries. Thus, it is possible for us to be graced not only by the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of the past but, also, by the considerably untapped ingenuity of the present. The best in everyone is brought forth when the best is required to succeed. . . .
>
> The free market works its wonders simply because the generative capacity of countless millions has no external force standing against its release.

Given that we can only access and generate wisdom by way of freedom and its incentives, Read concludes by reminding us of the large chasm between the many utopian promises would-be government authoritarians offer, on the one hand, and what they actually have the wisdom to do, on the other. This makes the vision of freedom essential to human advancement.

> Authoritarianism . . . presupposes nonexistent gods, that is, politicians who naively believe that they know how to steer mankind aright and, thus, can run your, my, and everyone else's life to humanity's advantage. . . . They haven't taken the very first step in wisdom, namely, achieving an awareness of how little they know. While no wizard among them all can even make a pencil, each has little doubt that mankind, if made in his infinitesimal image, would be improved and that all of our millions of requirements would better prosper under his direction. Prosper? Preposterous!
>
> The free market, on the other hand, is attuned to the little we know, it does not presuppose a nonexistent omniscience. Instead . . . the needed knowledge waits to be drawn upon. Everyone's life is free to flow and grow—life's fulfillment a possibility for each human being. Admittedly, freedom in this higher sense is indeed a vision; it is a castle in the air under which we are well advised to put foundations.

14.

I Prefer Security to Freedom

Benjamin Franklin once said, "Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety" (Franklin 1755). Replacing safety with security and liberty with freedom, the quote would be a great introduction to Leonard Read's "I Prefer Security to Freedom" (Read 2014a), originally contributed to a 1962 collection edited by the Foundation for Economic Education, *Clichés of Socialism*. While Franklin asks about what people who give up liberty for safety deserve, Read talks about what they would get. Freedom, he argues, is the path to any security that may be possible.

Are security and freedom mutually exclusive? "Many people wander unwittingly into socialism, gulled by assumptions they have not tested. One popular but misleading assumption is that security and freedom are mutually exclusive alternatives—that to choose one is to forego the other."

What has America's experience taught us about security and freedom? "In the United States during the past century, more people achieved greater material security than their ancestors had ever known in any previous society. . . . By reason of unprecedented freedom of choice, unparalleled opportunities, provident living, and the right to the fruits of their own labor—private property—they were able to meet the many exigencies that arise in the course of a lifetime. We think of these enviable, personal achievements as security. But this type of security is not an alternative to freedom; rather, it is an outgrowth of freedom."

At this point, Read makes a connection to a Ralph Waldo Emerson quote, which he cites frequently in his books ("Cause and effect, means and ends, seed and fruit, cannot be severed; for the effect already blooms in the cause, the end preexists in the means, the fruit in the seed" [Emerson 1841]): "This traditional security stems from freedom as the oak from an acorn. It is not a case of either/or; one without the other is impossible. Freedom sets the stage for all the security available in this uncertain world."

Next, he insists that we must distinguish the difference between the security that is actually achievable and what progressives mean when they talk about security—a guaranteed life.

> Security in its traditional sense, however, is not what the progressives are talking about when they ask, "Wouldn't you rather have security than freedom?" They have in mind what Maxwell Anderson called "the guaranteed life." . . . Under this dispensation, the political apparatus, having nothing at its disposal except the police force, uses this force to take the property of the more well-to-do in order to dispense the loot among the less well-to-do. . . .
>
> Admittedly, this procedure appears to attract millions of our fellow citizens. It relieves them, they assume, of the necessity of looking after themselves; Uncle Sam is standing by with bags of forcibly collected largess.
>
> To the unwary, this looks like a choice between security and freedom. But, in fact, it is the choice between the self-responsibility of a free man or the slave-like security of a ward of the government. Thus, if a person were to say, "I prefer being a ward of the government to exercising the personal practice of freedom," he would at least be stating the alternatives in correct terms.

In other words, freedom does not sacrifice security but enhances the form of security that is actually achievable for citizens who are responsible for themselves. But choosing security, in the form of a guaranteed life, necessarily sacrifices freedom along with the possibility of other forms of security.

> . . . Realize that the ward-of-the-government type of "security" does preclude freedom for all three parties involved. Those from whom their property is taken obviously are denied the freedom to use what they've earned from their labor. Secondly, people to whom the property is given—who get something for nothing—are forfeiting the most important reason for living: the freedom to be responsible for oneself. The third party in this setup—the authoritarian who does the taking and the giving—also loses his freedom.
>
> . . . The guaranteed life leads to general insecurity. Whenever government assumes responsibility for the security, welfare, and prosperity of citizens, the costs of government rise. . . . Unless arrested by a change in thinking and in policy, this process leads to all "guarantees" becoming worthless, and a general insecurity follows.

> The true and realistic alternatives are insecurity or security. Insecurity must follow the transfer of responsibility from self to others, particularly when transferred to arbitrary and capricious government. Genuine security is a matter of self-responsibility, based on the right to the fruits of one's own labor and the freedom to trade.

Read then summarizes his main point: "True security is an outgrowth of freedom, not an alternative to it." That is why "being dependent, instead of being *independent*, is a move away from true security."

15.

Ideal Candidates versus Ideal Government

One of the striking things about recent elections is the number of people who claim to be the ideal candidate for president. At the core of each of their campaigns is a promise to redistribute the economic pie to give a bigger piece to whomever is being addressed at the time. Each candidate becomes, in H.L. Mencken's words, "a broker in pillage" and "every election is a sort of advance auction sale of stolen goods" (Mencken 1956).

What none of those self-proclaimed "ideal" directors of our lives seem to notice, however, is that their promises are entirely at odds with the functions of an ideal government. If they were to deliver on their promises, they would impose unjustified harm on others.

Few people have made that clearer than Leonard Read, whose 1958 collection of lectures *Why Not Try Freedom?* (Read 1958) opens with "Government—an Ideal Concept." Revisiting Read's insights is particularly important today when the ideal government is so distant from current reality and presidential office-seekers compete with promises about who will accelerate us faster in our mistaken direction.

> Any person has a moral right to inhibit the destructive action of another or others. However, no person has a moral right to forcibly direct or to control what another shall invent, create, or discover; no right to dictate where he shall labor, how long he shall work, what his wage shall be, what and with whom he shall exchange, or what thoughts he shall entertain. No single person . . . no combination of persons . . . no agency, political or otherwise, has any such moral right.
>
> . . . The moral sanction for establishing government springs from the right of the individual to inhibit or prohibit or restrain the destructive actions of others. . . .
>
> . . . Removal of inhibitory influences—the kind imposed by man on men—serves to benefit all of us in common. . . .

. . . This can be accomplished by restraining aggressive force . . . [with] defensive or repellent force. . . .

. . . The rights to the fruits of one's own labor involves the restraint or the removal of obstacles to . . . one's own exchange, but also the obstacles to other people's exchange . . . [because] every other person has a similar right. . . .

The source of all creative and variable human energy . . . rests in . . . the individual, in such voluntary and cooperative actions as he may freely choose to take. . . . This is the vast, unlimited area of liberty, of self-reliance, and of self-discipline. . . .

. . . Rules and prohibitions for social administration can logically serve only the purpose of deterring man's destructive actions for the sake of giving full flower to his creative actions. . . . Government, within its proper bounds, can be but the protective servant of all individuals equally against antisocial marauders. . . .

. . . Cooperation for creative purposes requires, as an auxiliary, cooperation to annul destructive purposes. . . .

. . . Defensive force may be used to neutralize aggressive force, and such a use of forces serves a social end. This use of defensive force should be the guiding principle of the political agency. . . . The only dissenters would be those who want to live by predation. . . .

. . . Every human being is born with as much right to live his life creatively as any other man. Man, however, is incapable of protecting his life as a personal, individual project, and at the same time of realizing his human potential. . . . By reason of this social circumstance, he is committed, in principle, to cooperating with his fellow men in the protective project . . . where special privilege should be unknown.

. . . In short, the law's limitation inheres in its justification.

Force is a dangerous thing. Therefore, society's organized arm is a dangerous instrument. . . . When limited to its proper defensive scope, it is a positive good. When exceeding its proper limitations and becoming aggression, it is not a necessary but a positive evil.

> . . . One of the most distressing fallacies having to do with government and liberty is the assumption that the State, an agency presumably of the people, has rights beyond those possessed by the people. . . . No reasonable person can logically believe that any such control belongs to a multitude of citizens. . . . It is an arrogation. . . .
>
> Any person has the natural and moral right to use repellent or defensive force against any other person who would aggress against him. No person on this earth has any moral right of control over any other person superior to the defense of his own life and livelihood. . . .
>
> . . . Every individual has a vested interest in common with all other men in restraining all inhibitory influences to creative energy and creative energy exchanges. . . . All else is individual, voluntary, and cooperative as individuals may choose.

Leonard Read provides a valuable touchstone for a government of self-owning individuals: universal protection against violations of liberty. But America's recent candidates have behaved toward liberty as Superman does toward kryptonite. Liberty threatens to prevent the predation on others that their "superpowers" rely on. But no one whose campaign depends on violating the ideal form of government—by unjustly harming some citizens to buy support from others—can be an ideal candidate.

16.

Promises We Do and Do Not Live By

Here is a less than upbeat thought: "Civilization rests on a set of promises. . . . If the promises are broken too often the civilization dies" (quoted in Read 1976a). That Herbert Agar quote, combined with the recognition that promises are increasingly going unkept in society, is the sobering way Leonard Read begins "Promises Men Do and Do Not Live By," from his 1976 book *Comes the Dawn* (Read 1976a). Since what he wrote at that time seems even more applicable today, it is worth considerable attention.

> The set of promises on which civilization rests is rooted in integrity: borrow money, pay it back; make a contract, keep it; offer a good or service, let the representation of it be honest; make an engagement, respect it . . . on and on, no falsification whatsoever. These are the promises men live by. My purpose here, however, is not to reflect on promises which are kept, but on those which are broken. Broken promises are enormously on the increase in the U.S.A. and this bodes ill for our civilization.

To illustrate his point, Read quotes the Babylonian Talmud: ""The righteous promise little and perform much; the wicked promise much and perform not even a little.' . . . This Hebrew observation, written 15 centuries ago, measures men by what they do, not by what they say. Those who promise little and perform much are praised, while those who promise much and perform not even a little are condemned. Such a yardstick, applied to our day and age, makes a lot of sense."

Read finds an echo of that sentiment in what he calls "a masterpiece," William Graham Sumner's 1883 book *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other*.

> Sumner, a Professor of Political and Social Science at Yale University, clearly perceived an evil way of life taking root, one which has proliferated by leaps and bounds during the last forty years. "The forgotten man" was his label for the righteous. The wicked? Those reformers and social doctors . . . who advocate and employ the coercive force of government to subsidize nonworkers with the fruits of the forgotten man's labor.

> False promises and the social doctors or reformers labeled as wicked! Performances and the forgotten man identified as righteous! Here is a ray of politico-economic light. . . . Civilizations rise and fall as the few perceive or fail to perceive this truth.

What has supported the ongoing and expanding government failure to honor its foundational promise to better protect the property rights of the many forgotten men and women in our country? Read puts it well.

> Those who do no thinking for themselves . . . have forever been the victims of empty promises—the more extravagant, the greater the allure. Promise "All this and Heaven too!" . . .
>
> It is this mass deception which accounts for the false promisers: witch doctors, dictocrats, do-as-I-say reformers, be-like-me egotists. Nonthinkers—blind followers—constitute the target of these Pied Pipers. Thus the genesis of those who "promise much and perform not even a little."
>
> It is easy to see why they promise much. But why do they perform "not even a little"? It is because the promises they make are absolutely impossible of fulfillment! They promise, for instance, to assure welfare to one and all, not with their substance but with yours and mine . . . until finally—all parasites and no hosts!. . . . Promises galore, performance nil!
>
> The Pied Pipers promise . . . to plan the economy. Why, in this planned redistributive nonsense, do they perform "not even a little"?

To answer this question, Read quotes Friedrich Hayek on the subject of one of the latter's most important insights: central planning by its nature is inefficient because the immensely valuable details of time and place, known to individuals but undiscoverable by planners, must be thrown away along with the wealth they could have enabled. "The chief reason why we cannot hope by central direction [government planning] to achieve anything like the efficiency in the use of resources which the market makes possible is that the economic order of any large society *rests on the utilization of the knowledge of particular circumstances widely dispersed among thousands or millions of individuals*."

Read follows up by connecting Hayek back to Adam Smith's "invisible hand."

> Even the millions who haven't the slightest idea of what makes an economy fruitful or unfruitful do, nonetheless,

> come up with literally trillions of goods and services—all novel and beneficial to millions of us whom they have no intention of benefiting. These unintentional benefactors are nudged into productivity not by politico-economic understanding. Far from it! What then? Adam Smith wrote the answer 200 years ago:
>
> > By directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention.

But unlike the invisible hand of voluntary arrangements in markets that honor property rights, government's "visible foot" violates property rights. It is not just clumsy, due to its squandering of information that can only be put in play by people who make decisions for themselves—it is also a grave risk to civilization.

> Here, again, the promises of the Pied Pipers—government planners—are absolutely impossible of fulfillment. Their coercive input is composed exclusively of errors. If this point were more generally understood, that understanding would put an end to the Command Society. For such understanding, recognize two facts: (1) The productive input for any given year has its origin in literally trillions of ideas, inventions—think-of-thats—by millions of individuals. (2) New ideas . . . *could not possibly be foreseen by self-ordained rulers*.

Read turns to an idea from his famous "I, Pencil" essay that illustrates the complexity of a single part of the process of making a pencil—sulphonated tallow—and how things most of us have never heard or thought of can be part of the benefits we all gain from one another via voluntary relationships.

> For example, take a "simple" pencil. One of the countless ingredients is a wetting agent: sulphonated tallow—animal fats chemically reacted with sulphuric acid. Imagine the number of individuals, the span of time, the experimental failures and steps forward in bringing sulphuric acid into existence! And who or how many had a hand in chemically reacting this "oil of vitriol" with animal fats to make possible a "simple" pencil? Simple? The creative process, even in the simplest items, baffles the imagination of anyone who will

> seriously peer below the surface and, by so doing, realize that here indeed are countless miracles at the human level.

Read compares those who are wicked in government, "who promise much and perform absolutely nothing," with those in markets, who "perform much," often unintentionally, for others, by honoring property rights and living up to agreements.

> Those who promise much and perform *absolutely* nothing are wicked in the sense that they are motivated by vanity rather than morality. . . .
>
> False promises intended to advance power over others are clearly immoral. And the same can be said of false promises that are unintentional, those born of ignorance. Falsifying is wicked, regardless of the reason for lying.
>
> Enough of the wicked. What about their opposite, the righteous, the ones who promise little and perform much? Who are they? They are the millions who, year in and year out, have trillions of ideas, seeking their own gain, and who serve all of us with their productive efforts. They are classed by Sumner as forgotten men.
>
> Why forgotten? The knowledge of how freedom works its wonders is so infinitesimal that these unintentional benefactors are not generally recognized as such, which makes it plausible for the Pied Pipers to claim the credit for our welfare.
>
> [Thus,] forgotten men . . . go on playing host to the rapidly growing number of parasites.
>
> . . . Take any one of these millions you care to choose, for instance, one of the many who had a hand in a pencil's wetting agent. Did he promise what he was going to invent or discover prior to the moment an idea flashed into mind? Impossible! His performance alone is the extent of his promise.
>
> We have in these productive millions—so far as promises and performances are concerned—the righteous. They are our unintentional benefactors—miracle workers. They are so little recognized that we might call them the secret agents of the free market. One of these days one or more of us will find a way to replace this secrecy with understanding and clarity—a greatly needed performance. Then? *Everyone will win*!

17.

How Not to Be Owned

Who insists they want to be owned? No one I know. And yet freedom is a rare outlier in history, infrequently and slowly gained but often quickly lost. Given its slow, halting achievement and potentially precipitous decline, we should give the preservation of our self-ownership deeper and more consistent thought.

Leonard Read does just that in "How Not to Be Owned," from his 1974 book *Having My Way* (Read 1974). The connection between rights and liberty made in the title is worth revisiting. Here are some highlights.

> Who is to control the fruits of your labor, you or others? . . . Private ownership is the very heart of the free society but. . . . throughout the ages, the plunderers have had it by a mile. . . . Private ownership comes out in last place. . . .
>
> . . . The Commandment, "Thou shalt not steal," presupposes private ownership. Why? How possibly could anything be stolen were it not first owned!
>
> Here we have a stress on the importance of private ownership, so strong that a violation was deemed a religious offense. . . .
>
> . . . Millions hold private ownership as a sacred right for themselves but fail to realize that *unless this precise right is extended to everyone else, it is no right at all*—a mere fiction! . . . When each citizen proclaims ownership of his earnings and fails to . . . insist upon a similar ownership on the part of everyone else, the outcome has to be all citizens against one. For the person who is not permitted to own what he has earned is in fact owned by a master!
>
> . . . [What] queer notions of right and wrong, each respecting his own property but not that of the other person. . . .
>
> . . . But, really, what is the difference between a political collective backed by a constabulary and a man's passion to enslave backed by a lash? There is no less compulsion in one case than in the other. . . .

It is as simple as this: If a man has a right to his life—to "own" himself—it logically follows that he has a right to sustain his life, the sustenance of life being the fruits of one's own labor. Thus, to the extent that one's sustenance is taken . . . to that extent is one owned instead of owning himself.

Where lies the remedy? What has to happen before individuals will concede to others precisely the same right to ownership as they seek for themselves? Observe the Golden Rule? Yes, that is the answer all right, but in the same sense that "Thou shalt not steal" is the answer.

Here is a realization we must come to: The Golden Rule and the Commandment are but labels for ideal and hoped-for relationships. In a dictocratic society they are unattainable pipe dreams. In a free society they automatically exist. These ideal relationships grow toward reality only to the extent that the free society approaches reality. . . .

. . . Freedom and private ownership, as well as an observation of the Golden Rule, rise or fall in unison; they are inseparably linked!

Once this is understood, it becomes clear why "Thou shalt not steal" has so little practical meaning [today]. . . . The Commandment against theft is no more than a mystical aspiration in a dictocratic situation, and cannot be otherwise.

Whenever the right to the fruits of one's own labor is gaining acceptance and respect . . . understanding of the free society is likewise gaining. . . . When state welfarism and government control is on the rampage, as in the U.S.A. today . . . leaders . . . wave aside the free society as a viable way of life. . . . Their philosophy, though never in these realistic terms, is that you and I shall not be permitted to own; we are to be owned. . . .

. . . The coercive control of people's lives—including the fruits of their labor—falls or rises precisely as the practice of freedom increases or wanes, which is to say, as authoritarianism relaxes or tightens its grip.

> Freedom is the right of anyone to do anything, so long as it is peaceful. Government is freedom's peace-keeping agency; its role is limited to codifying and prohibiting all unpeaceful or destructive activities.
>
> Given this freedom arrangement, each citizen is free to produce anything he pleases, to exchange on mutually agreeable terms with whomever he pleases, to do as he chooses with what is his own and without trespass against others.
>
> We have in this ideal situation only willing exchanges, whether of goods or services. Each citizen gains in his own judgment or he would not make the exchanges. Each owns; no one is owned. There is neither thievery nor enslavement; both are impossible. Each is behaving toward others as he would have them behave toward him. In a word, the Golden Rule is observed as freedom is practiced.
>
> How to own rather than be owned? Learn the freedom philosophy and how to live by it!

Leonard Read sees how rare freedom is in human history, but he recognizes America as the greatest outlier, the product of a long and often dismal path that finally led to the founding. He also sees that a regression from the ideas of the founding has been taking place for a long time. Both insights lead him to defend our rights and liberty against encroachment and to advance them wherever possible. He and FEE, which was founded for that purpose, deserve our gratitude. And the best way to do that is to understand the importance of the ideas of the founding well enough to put them into practice.

18.

The Roots of Concord and Discord

In all three synoptic Gospels, Jesus says that "a house divided against itself cannot stand" (Matthew 12:25; Mark 3:25; Luke 11:17). But more Americans have probably heard this quote in the context of Abraham Lincoln's "House Divided" speech about slavery, delivered on June 16, 1858 after he was chosen over Stephen Douglas as the Illinois Republican nominee for the US Senate.

The principle seems to apply once again to America. Many politicians promise to protect us from division by unifying us (e.g., President Joe Biden's promise to be a leader who "seeks not to divide, but to unify" [Joseph Biden, Twitter post, November 23, 2020]), but the only unity they really seem to offer is that of putting together a bare majority to benefit themselves at the expense of others. Such unity is just a form of tyranny.

We can benefit from what Lincoln says about his choice of words for the speech: "I want to use some universally known figure, expressed in simple language as universally known, that it may strike home to the minds of men in order to rouse them to the peril of the times" (Herndon 1889).

Leonard Read echoes the language and seriousness of the problem in his "The Roots of Concord and Discord," from his 1975 book *The Love of Liberty* (Read 1975b), because it was clear to him how divided our house was. "The house we call America is divided against itself, as is evident to anyone who has eyes to see and ears to hear. Discord is rampant; concord is rare. . . . If our house is to stand, concord must replace discord and, if this is to be accomplished, we must practice the way of life that leads to harmony."

The contrasting roads to discord and concord consist of dictocratic determination, on the one hand, and free markets, on the other.

> What road are we now treading? It's the road to serfdom. Day by day and in nearly every way, we move nearer to omnipotent government, the totalitarian state—dictocrats by the millions telling us how to live our lives. . . . *When discord is rampant, we're on the wrong road; when concord prevails, we're on the right one.*
>
> What is the road in the opposite direction? It is the free market, private ownership, limited government way of

> life. Not a single dictocrat—those in government confined to invoking a common justice and keeping the peace. In a word, no man-concocted restraints standing against the release of creative human energy.

Read then evaluates dictocratic determination and the discord—lack of unity, in more modern terms—that results. Discord reflects an attempt to coerce people to conform with the wishes of some in the absence of consensus.

> Why does the road featured by dictocrats lead to discord? And why does the road in the opposite direction, featured by a free and self-responsible people, lead to concord? . . .
>
> The road to serfdom—socialism, the planned economy, the welfare state, call it what you will—is featured by millions of dictocrats . . . each trying to make over society in his image. In view of their dissimilarities, it is instructive to reflect on what dictocrats have in common: . . . Each entertains no doubt that were he to direct the whole economy it would be improved.
>
> . . . Note the mess we're in—the failures more apparent each day. And the discord! With millions of dictocrats advancing as many or more panaceas—all at odds—how could it be otherwise! . . .
>
> . . . Given socialism as the objective, we will have to learn that there is no right way to achieve the wrong goal. . . . All that the dictocrats can possibly do to modify their mistakes . . . is to attempt something less bad. But not so bad is error still! Never can what's right be achieved in this manner. . . . The seed is socialism; the fruit has to be discord!
>
> Each individual of the millions afflicted with this egomania—all dictocrats—assesses himself as the focal point of wisdom. I know I know! These millions are in constant tension—every assumed focal point of wisdom being at odds one with the other. Discord!

The ability to freely choose is what converts the discord created by dictocrats into concord. All parties whose rights are involved must agree to the arrangements made, and dictocrats must not violate the rights of any parties to decide for themselves. "What then is the way of life that leads to

harmony? It is every man pursuing his legitimate—intelligent—self-interest, that is, acting any way he pleases so long as his way does not impair the rights of others to be their creative selves."

Here, Read quotes Frédéric Bastiat, who "so clearly saw the efficacy of this way." "It is *practical*, for certainly no maxim is easier to put into practice than this: Let men labor, exchange, learn, band together, act and react upon one another, since in this way, according to the laws of Providence, there can result from their free and intelligent activity only *order*, *harmony*, *progress*, and all things that are good, and increasingly good, and still better, and better yet to infinite degree."

In a world of scarcity, it is seldom possible to achieve voluntary agreement. There is no real unity in that direction. But despite our disagreements about who should get what, we share far greater unity about what we do *not* want to happen to us. None of us wants violated what John Locke calls our "lives, liberties and estates" (Locke 1690). We want our rights and property defended against invasion so that we may peacefully pursue our goals.

As Lord Acton puts it, "liberty is the only object which benefits all alike, and provokes no sincere opposition" (Acton 1862). Because the freedom to choose for ourselves is always the primary means to our ultimate ends, the traditional functions of government are to protect us from abuse. Acton recognizes that liberty requires "the limitation of the public authority" because when a government gives rights and privileges to some at the expense of the rights of others—the mainstay of dictocratic society—it becomes the most dangerous predator.

Well-established property rights and the voluntary market arrangements they enable let individuals decide for themselves, limiting each of us to persuasion rather than coercion. And since we would all rather be persuaded than coerced, the unity that is impossible in allocating resources for everyone is possible in our personal preferences.

> Reflect on . . . how we may switch from the kind of actions that produce discord to the way of life that leads to concord . . . [where] liberty is a blessing to everyone. . . .
>
> . . . [Now] aggregate coercion is unimaginable, coercion in every instance being the root of discord. . . . Is it any wonder that discord rather than concord is dominant!
>
> . . . These people who exercise coercion see only the "advantages" of their special privilege, of their coercion.

> They fail utterly to see that were it not for an enormous leakage of creative human energy—liberty—they wouldn't even exist to practice their legal plunder. . . .
>
> The remedy is nothing less than an eye-opening performance, seeing that which is not seen. It is the seeing at once of a delusion and of a truth.
>
> The delusion? It is a belief that the dictocrats' coercive tactics are responsible for life being as good as it still is. That which is seen!
>
> The truth? That the free flowing of creative energy—liberty—is the source of human welfare. That which is not seen!

Leonard Read thus sees that the journey from discord to concord is one of expanding people's ability to choose for themselves under private-property rights, rather than dictocrats making those choices without our consent and often against our will. This requires better protection of our rights than we "enjoy" today. We would continue to disagree about many things, but our disagreements would no longer threaten our society. "Concord can replace discord. It is only a matter of seeing. When seen, our house will no longer be divided against itself."

19.

Harmonizing to Each His Own

Change often induces fear—including the fear that our well-being will be eroded due to changes in markets. For instance, the invention of a cheaper way to provide a service that I currently provide could lower my wage. The potential for harm in change makes us risk-averse. But without change, there can be no new ideas, no innovations, no improvement, and no growth. Trying to stop change to lock in our current well-being undermines the process that has provided most of the benefits we have come to enjoy—all of which required improvements in our options—and that will benefit us and increase our economic security in the future if all arrangements remain voluntary.

Such fear is a significant motive force behind all forms of protectionism, including those against domestic rivals, international rivals, potential entrants to an industry, new techniques, and new products. We are all tempted by the thought of limiting the rights and freedoms of others to lock in our current advantages. But it would be unjust if I could limit your rights but you could not limit mine. And if anyone could limit the rights of anyone else, then we would be even worse off. Voluntary exchange benefits rather than harms those whose rights are involved.

In "Harmonizing to Each His Own," from his 1972 book *To Free or Freeze: That Is the Question* (Read 1972a), Leonard Read compares the freedom to seek out and offer improvement in willing arrangements with the attempt to freeze out such potential improvements. In opposition to those who seek favors from the government—who, as Henry Hazlitt puts it, hire "the best buyable minds" to argue that favors for themselves are good for everyone—Read explains why freedom for all, when subject to respect for the rights of others, is better than the melee of the favor-seeking competition to restrict the rights of others.

> Man could not live, let alone improve his lot, were all static as a rock. Change releases the hidden strength of men. Out of change comes variation and in this diversity are unique potentialities realized. Creative dissimilarities emerge and account for our moral, spiritual, intellectual, and material

> wealth. Change is of the very essence of life, and freedom to change is both an economic and a biologic necessity.
>
> [But] most persons tend to dislike it. . . . [It is] inevitable and necessary but, nonetheless, much resented. This feature of human nature . . . substantially accounts for the continuing debate over freedom versus coercive collectivism.
>
> The main reason for resenting change . . . originates in a misunderstanding of how security is best obtained. Individuals, with rare exceptions, are interested first and foremost in securing life and livelihood. Security is indeed an objective but, contrary to general belief, it is never more than a dividend of natural change and variation—each pursuing his own uniqueness. There is no security to be found in bringing change and variation to a halt; nothing is so at odds with security as freezing . . . the status quo. Seek first security and there will be neither security nor change. Seek first the dynamic, improving life and such security as is possible is thrown in as a rewarding outcome.

The freedom to direct creative and value-creating efforts is a means to mutually beneficial harmony, but to many it sounds like chaos and requires an authority to prevent meltdown.

> [There have been] countless attempts at harmonizing our variations. . . . Not only is there myself to cope with: to grow, emerge, evolve, to become what I am not yet; equally challenging, I must find out how to live in harmony with my fellowmen. My life and welfare depend not only on what I make of me but also on how I associate myself with others upon whom I am also rigorously dependent, a dependence from which there is no escape. Except in association, I perish! . . .
>
> There are, broadly, two opposed theories as to how the sociological maelstrom should be resolved. The first—authoritarian—is steeped in tradition, as aged as humanity, and presently gaining ground all over the world. It is the old, old master-slave arrangement that has always stifled human progress and diverted man's efforts to fighting, either to force his will on others or to combat the tyrant's

army. The second—freedom—is brand new as history goes, all too seldom understood or accepted. . . .

. . . The authoritarian vision is limited and blurred at best.

What then must be the outcome of the authoritarian's solution to social problems, assuming that his will is invoked? Simple: all of us compelled to abide by what he sees . . . which, of course, is next to nothing. All of us, if his will prevails, restricted by his oblique view of reality.

Here, Read makes sure we realize that the cost of authoritarian "solutions" is far greater than any imagined benefit.

All that is good—*no exception*—springs from creative human energy obeying its nature, that is, freely flowing when not squelched. . . .

. . . Only a person deficient in reasoning powers . . . could possibly believe that any scheme can "bring us out where we want to be." This is an I posing as we—absurd! The flowering society, the only kind that merits our interest, is one that will not stand in the way of bringing you out where you want to be, while permitting the same opportunities for everyone else. And this is definitely a prospect when millions—yes, trillions—of decisions are made independently of each other, that is, a situation in which freedom of choice prevails.

. . . Instead of chaos there is order and stability—an incomprehensible harmony. . . .

What at first blush appears as utter chaos . . . turns out to be precisely the opposite: a harmonic whole in the absence of I's trying to play we. You to your knitting, me to mine, each pursuing his unique potential. . . . For only in this manner am I able to draw on your and everyone else's unique realizations, others possessing countless ideas, enlightenments, goods, services hardly any one of which is within my own potential. When freedom prevails, we can think of our situation as a vast human grid, supplies responding to demands in a perpetual willing exchange. *A harmonizing of to each his own*!

Finally, Read reminds us that to understand freedom is to undergo a kind of cognitive therapy. One confronts the unfounded fear of change that leads people to support usurpers of freedom whose insufficient abilities (despite their delusions of competence) actually harm us all. "We need only know (1) that freedom does work wonders—the evidence is commonplace and all about us—and (2) that freedom exists in the absence of man-concocted restraints against the release of creative energy. And observe how simple—and realistic—this is: it does not presuppose a single know-it-all!"

20.

Preemption: Legal Thievery

While it is not a very common term, preemption shows up on occasion in our discourse. Sporting events and specials preempt regularly scheduled programs, and under the supremacy clause of the Constitution, federal law is said to preempt state legislative powers. But seldom have I seen it applied to government preemption of citizens' rights, the protection of which, according to John Locke, is its central task.

Locke makes the point clear in his *Second Treatise of Government*, when he wrote that "political power . . . can have no other end . . . but to preserve the members of that society in their lives, liberties, and possessions" (Locke 1690). This principle limits government efforts to advance the "general welfare," as the Constitution's preamble puts it, to actions that preserve our rights. As a result, "the supreme power cannot take from any man any part of his property without his own consent . . . the preservation of property being the end of government, and that for which men enter society." Consequently, "whenever the legislators endeavor to take away . . . the property of the people . . . by this breach of trust they forfeit the power the people had put into their hands for quite contrary ends."

Leonard Read addresses this lacuna in attention to government's preemption of what it should defend in "Pre-emption: Legal Thievery," from his 1981 book *Thoughts Rule the World*. Given that such preemption has expanded dramatically, shrinking Americans' rights even further in the four decades since he wrote this essay, Read's words merit serious consideration.

> Of all the devilish tactics which are leading the U.S.A. head-on into socialism pre-emption tops the list . . . legal thievery on the grand scale! . . .
>
> Government is organized force! It issues edicts backed by a constabulary—a physical force . . . [that] can restrain, inhibit and penalize. What, in all good conscience, should be restrained, inhibited and penalized? The answer was given in the moral codes long before Christianity: the "Thou shalt nots"—destructive actions such as stealing, killing, and so on. Inhibit those destructive acts: that's what government can legitimately do—period!

> Most important is what government can not do. It is not and can never be a creative force. . . .
>
> What, then, is government's proper role? It is to inhibit all destructive actions, keep the peace, and invoke a common justice. Leave all creative actions . . . to citizens acting privately, voluntarily, competitively, cooperatively.

Read gives a dictionary definition of preemption—"To seize before anyone else can; *excluding others*"—to open a discussion about government acts that don't preempt Americans' charitable efforts but often act as if they do. He points out that government preemption extends beyond what government officially takes over. "Government has not pre-empted welfare. We can, if we so choose, give to others as generously as we please. However, government spends so much on welfare . . . that most citizens behave as if it were pre-empted. Their reaction to a starving neighbor: 'That's the government's job.' Were they not afflicted with the pre-emptive error, they would share their last loaf of bread with their starving neighbor."

He then turns to the more formal government preemption of its citizens' rights.

> What do I mean by legal pre-emption? . . . Any productive, peaceful activity or service which government puts out of bounds to ordinary citizens, like the service of delivering private messages as a profit-making enterprise. The national government has legally pre-empted this service; it runs the U.S. Postal Service, and there is a law . . . making it a crime for any private citizen to go into the business of first-class mail delivery. . . .
>
> Legal pre-emption of any peaceful service . . . results in a species of thievery. In the case of mail delivery, legal pre-emption *robs* entrepreneurs . . . of the opportunity to deliver mail . . . [which should be] left to the free market where the wisdom is. . . .
>
> Governmental pre-emption of mail delivery results in ever-increasing prices and the service declines year by year.

Why is government preemption not only a violation of its citizens' rights but also a severe detriment to voluntary arrangements in society and the well-being they make possible?

> . . . Creative wisdom never originates in political action. . . .

> . . . An officeholder tends to speak or to write as a member of a party or as the voice of a political collective. The individual and the personal are unwanted byproducts when words are fed into the political meatgrinder, only to come out as a homogenized communique! The truth is ultimately a personal witness issuing from a man's highest self. . . . Words . . . must match the man who voices them; take away the man and his words have lost any attachment to reality . . . and with it the truth. . . .
>
> The freedom way of life has its birth in a nation of self-responsible, self-reliant citizens—individualism—but *never* from a collectivistic society. . . . *Political collectives do not nor can they create*!

Read reminds us that it is not only politicians who deserve condemnation for their preemptive tendencies but also all those who try to manipulate government policy to create preemptions that let them "feather their own nests," as he so often describes it, at others' expense.

> Let us not cast the derogatory eye only at political officeholders. Many citizens in all walks of life seek private advantage from some form of pre-emptive action. Labor unions keep non-members and youngsters from job opportunities; minimum wage laws outlaw the more or less unskilled. Then there are businessmen who obtain or advocate embargoes or tariffs in their effort to pre-empt freedom to trade goods and services. There is not an occupational category in which preemptive thinking or action does not exist. . . . Thus, we have 'thievery on the grand scale, honored by a triumphal procession.'

Is there a solution for indefensible government preemption? It is not to coercively correct the ways of others. As Leonard Read emphasized over and over in his writing, the best each of us can do is to reform ourselves, resisting the desire to benefit ourselves by harming others. "The nearest one can come to remedying this thievery is by example: *Make oneself an honest person and there will be one less rascal in the world*!"

21.

How Socialism Harms All Individuals

As the modern redistributive, or leveling, state has grown and grown, a generally accepted view has evolved that redistribution benefits the recipients, ennobles the legislators, and doesn't really harm those taken from because they are only paying their fair share to society. Ludwig von Mises recognized that this view is wrong. "In the short run an individual or a group may profit from violating the interests of other groups or individuals. But in the long run, in indulging in such actions, they damage their own selfish interests no less than those of the people they have injured. The sacrifice that a man or a group makes in renouncing some short-run gains, lest they endanger the peaceful operation of the apparatus of social cooperation, is merely temporary. It amounts to an abandonment of a small immediate profit for the sake of incomparably greater advantages in the long run" (Mises 1978).

Leonard Read develops Mises's theme in "How Socialism Harms the Individual," from his 1964 book *Anything That's Peaceful* (Read 1964a).

> The emergence of the individual . . . [is] our objective. . . .
>
> . . . All persons . . . are harmed by social leveling. . . . The whole caboodle of what are called "social gains" not only fail to benefit anyone but, rather, have a deteriorating effect on everyone. . . .
>
> . . . We must not assume . . . that harm is visited only on the person from whom is taken. . . .
>
> . . . There are several aspects of life we cannot turn over to others without harm to our individual expansion. . . . We are well advised not to leave our liberty in someone else's hands. Further . . . charity is a distinctly personal, not a collective, matter. . . .
>
> Can any person relieve himself of charitable concerns without losing a priceless ingredient of individual emergence? Does not a growth of the spirit and soul of man require that a concern for others be retained for strictly personal attention? . . .

. . . Millions . . . wish to make their own decisions as to how the fruits of their own labor should be expended. They have judgments concerning people in their own orbits, based on intimate experiences and relationships, a knowledge which no agency—governmental or private—can possibly possess. Are these persons to be deprived of their own funds and the practice of personal charity denied to them because some others wish the government to preempt the welfare activity?

. . . This voluntary act [charity]—one of the highest expressions of a common brotherhood—is thwarted when your honestly acquired income is taken by government. What was yours has been arbitrarily declared not yours; a "social" claim on your labor has been decreed. Indeed, government now operates on the theory that it has a first lien on your income and capital; your freedom of choice is severely restricted. . . . The state will practice charity for you. A common brotherhood, by some quirk of reasoning, is to become a collective act of compulsion!

. . . Do strangers who didn't earn it have any right, in logic and justice, to what you have earned? . . .

It isn't possible to see other than harm done to the person . . . by the compulsory taking of his income.

. . . Does any able adult person "in need" really benefit by living on the confiscated income of others? Does this ever improve his character or his mental and physical faculties? His growth? Does anyone ever benefit by the removal of self-responsibility? . . .

Life's problems—obstacles—are not without purpose. They aid the processes of self-development. . . . They demand of the individual that he gather new strength to hurdle each new obstacle. The art of becoming is composed of acts of overcoming.

. . . Rewards not associated with one's own effort tend to weaken the sinews which make for growth. Such rewards—handouts—remove the necessity for production and invite potential producers to remain non-producers. In short, there is an ever-present danger that they may encourage a person to become a parasite, living off what

others produce. Parasitism is not associated with man's upgrading.

. . . Responsibility and authority . . . are meant to go hand-in-hand. When the responsibility for one's own welfare is surrendered to government, it follows that the authority to conduct one's life goes where the responsibility is reposed. . . .

The idea set forth in the Declaration of Independence that each person has an inherent and inalienable right to life becomes meaningless when a person loses the authority for his own decisions and must act according to someone else's dictates. Unless an individual is self-controlling, his life is not truly his own. Before a life can be valued for its own sake—not simply a means to someone else's goal—that life must retain its own power to choose, along with its own quality, its own dignity. Without self-power, there is no basis for love, respect, and friendship; . . . The powerless person becomes either a puppet or an unwanted burden. . . .

. . . The evil means of confiscating income must lead to an evil end to those who live on it.

Actually, we are dealing here with . . . a double standard of morality. Comparatively few persons will take private property without the owner's consent. We think of that as stealing. . . . Yet we will form a collective—politically group ourselves—and take billions in income without consent; we thoughtlessly call it "doing good."

Doing politically what we reject doing individually in no manner alters the immorality of the act; it merely legalizes the wrong and, thus, gains social absolution for the criminal; giving it the political twist keeps one from being tossed into jail! But to anyone who rejects the authoritarianism of a majority as much as that of a Stalin—to anyone who believes in the right to life and to one's honestly acquired property—no moral absolution is gained by legislation.

Those who think only materialistically may argue that the stealing of a loaf of bread is . . . a gain to the thief, if the thief "gets away with it." This is an incorrect view. . . . The one who takes the loaf without the owner's consent loses not only the respect of all who know him but loses also his

integrity! Man can never realize his creative potentialities without integrity. This virtue lies at the root of emergence. To live on loot appears to be no further removed from evil than to take the loot.

Unless one believes in authoritarianism—that men should lord it over men, that some fallible humans should cast the rest of us in their little images—it is not possible to see anything but harm done to the person in "need" who is "aided" by taking the income of others without their consent.

. . . In social leveling by compulsion, the authoritarian. . . [is] the one who administers the taking and the giving. . . . But what about . . . the well-meaning social reformer at the top of the political heap who uses the police force as his means of persuasion? Is harm done to him? Yes. . . .

The person who attempts by force to direct or rearrange the *creative* activities of others is in a very real sense a slave-master. And here is the crux of it: A slave-master becomes a slave himself when he enslaves others. If another has me on my back, holding me down, he is as permanently fastened on top of me as I am under him. Both of us are enslaved. True, he can, by force, keep me from being creative; but in so doing, his own energies must be diverted from creative to destructive actions. He cannot upgrade himself while he is employing his energies to downgrade. One who only destroys is himself destroyed. . . . Man's usefulness to himself, to other men, to Creation's purpose is to be achieved only by personal upgrading. . . .

All aspects of upgrading are creative in character. Necessarily they first demand . . . self-cultivation. Nothing creative is induced by compulsion. . . . Compulsion has only the power to restrain, repress, suppress, penalize, destroy. By the use of sufficient force, I can keep you from acting creatively; but no amount of force can compel you to think, to invent, to discover. . . . Compulsion is antagonistic to creativeness.

. . . I cannot indulge in my own upgrading at the same time I am inhibiting someone else's creative action. Therefore, to the extent that one's life is spent in using force

> to coerce others, to that extent is one's life destroyed, its higher purpose frustrated. . . .
>
> Observe the profound change that comes over men when they are given power over others. . . . They begin to think like authoritarians; they talk like authoritarians; they act like authoritarians; for, indeed, they are authoritarians. It is as if a chemical change had taken place in their persons.
>
> Power or authority over the creative activities of others—that is, a responsibility for the creative behavior of others [has] an inevitably destructive consequence. Thus overburdened, a wielder of power eventually becomes intolerant, quick-tempered, irrational, disrespectful, and unrespected. . . .
>
> Further, when in possession of political power over the creative actions of others, a fallible human being is almost certain to mistake this power for infallibility. . . . They cannot abide dissenters. . . .
>
> . . . The authoritarian act is always directed outward at other persons.
>
> The directing of, or the meddling in, the creative activities of others—the dictator role—is so compellingly corrupting that no person, interested in his own upgrading, should ever accept the role. . . . The likelihood of corruption is so great that any person is warranted in confessing, "Even I cannot assume this role without being corrupted."
>
> . . .
>
> . . . All of us are degraded to the extent that social leveling by compulsion is practiced, whether we are primarily the ones with "ability," the ones with "need," or the ones who act as the coercive do-gooders or levelers.
>
> The only way, then, that we can avoid personal degradation is to avoid social leveling by compulsion. Not a single person is benefited; all are harmed by socialism.

Leonard Read recognizes clearly what few others have to this day: the pursuit of liberty is the most effective means of benefiting everyone in society. Redistribution, that vast apparatus of social leveling that tries to directly benefit the poor by coercing charity, undermines the liberty that offers the poor the only real, morally defensible path to economic improvement.

But, for Read, the damage to the recipients' integrity, without which "man can never realize his creative potentialities," is even more important than the lost economic possibilities because "this virtue lies at the root of emergence." And liberty is also the only way to develop ourselves to our utmost potential, to grow into more responsible, creative, and productive individuals.

> Let government confine itself to defending the life, liberty, and property of each of us equally; in short, let government keep the peace! Leave all creative action to men acting freely, all creative energy flowing unrestrained and uninhibited. Only the release of creative energy can produce abundance, be it material, intellectual, or spiritual. Given these kinds of abundance, along with the unrestrained freedom to act creatively, and there will be as much good done by each for others as there is good within us to give.

22.

A Cliché of Socialism: Under Public Ownership, We the People Own It

Leonard Read always has an ear out for widely accepted but misleading clichés that serve to aggrandize government power and limit liberty. In his 1965 article "A Cliché of Socialism: Under Public Ownership, We the People Own it!" (Read 1965a), he focuses his attention on the large gap between public ownership of assets and the idea that "we the people" own them.

Read points out that not only is public ownership misunderstood but goods privately owned by another party are in fact much more available to an individual's control than goods supposedly owned in common.

> Public ownership and government control are synonymous terms—two ways of expressing an identical concept. The popular notion is that a resource or service is the possession of we, the people, when it is under government ownership and dispensation, and that we, the people, are objects of exploitation when resources are under private ownership and willing exchange. Socialism—public ownership—will continue to expand as long as this notion dominates.

Read argues that those who view government ownership as the solution to exploitation, which supposedly characterizes private ownership, have their argument backward. Private ownership prevents irresponsible government management as well as the exploitation of the alleged owners of government assets. Until that error is recognized, public control will expand and individual control will shrink.

> Public ownership, so-called, contrary to popular notions, is definitely not we-the-people ownership. If it were, we could exchange our share in TVA or the Post Office for dollars, just as we can exchange a share of corporation stock for dollars.

> At least two conditions are necessary for ownership to exist: (1) having title, and (2) having control. . . . Without control, ownership is pure fiction.
>
> While in some vague way "we, the people," are supposed to have title to TVA, for instance, we have not even a vestige of control. . . . "But," some will counter, "neither do you control the corporation in which you hold stock." True, I do not perform the managerial function, but I do control whether or not I'll retain or sell the stock, which is to say, I control whether or not I will share in the gains or losses. Further, I am free to choose whether or not to work for the corporation or to buy or refrain from buying its products. My control in the nongovernmental corporate arrangement is very real, indeed.

Who controls—has real authority over—what we the people supposedly own?

> Who, then, does control and thus own TVA, the Post Office, and the like? At best, it is a nebulous, shifting control—often difficult to identify. Rooted in political plunder, government ownership and operation is an irresponsible control; that is, there is never a responsibility in precise alignment with authority. The mayor of a city may have complete authority over the socialized water system, but responsibility for failure is by no means commensurately assumed by him. . . . Most people crave authority provided responsibility doesn't go with it. This explains, in part, why political office is so attractive and why "we, the people," do not even remotely own what is held in the name of public ownership.

An individual has more potential control over what someone else privately owns than over what the public supposedly owns. There is generally no way for an individual to exert real control over a government's decision about one of its assets, but all that is needed to control a privately held asset is to negotiate a voluntary sale.

> One truly owns those things to which he holds exclusive title and exclusive control, and for which he has responsibility. . . . The things that are privately owned by others are far more available for one's own title and control than is the case in "public ownership."

> Public ownership often creates . . . attractive illusions. For instance, people served by TVA are using twice as much power and light as the national average. Why? TVA charges less than half the price. Because of lower production costs? Indeed, not! The rest of us around the nation are taxed to cover the TVA deficit. But power and light acquired in this manner can no more classify as "ours" than can any good or service forcibly extorted from true owners.
> . . .
> . . . Observe that the "public" ownership of water has all but dried up the availability of water for private use. What kind of a social service is it that, by depriving individuals of title and control, finally denies them the service!
> If private availability—ownership in the sense of use, title, control—is what interests us, then we will do well to preserve private ownership and an open, willing-exchange market.

Leonard Read's understanding of the difference between private and public ownership was important when he wrote about it, but seems even more important now. Just consider how popular it is now to demean opponents of leftism as fascists. Fascism maintains a gloss of private ownership over assets controlled by government so that people will blame capitalism for the abuses that result. But virtually every policy supported by those who hurl such ad hominem insults represents just such government control without accountability. They hypocritically support fascist policies while calling their opponents fascists. Read's insight can help us sort out who is more fascist. We only have to ask who supports the policies that reduce the control of private owners over their assets and vests it in bodies over which those owners have no control.

23.

Unscrambling Socialism

Many years ago, in "Unscrambling Socialism" (Read 1964e), Leonard Read wrote the following: "Any adept student of human action knows that it isn't enough merely to 'drop anchor' in today's sea of socialism, that is, to stop where we are. The U.S. is already playing host to more parasitic socialism than the economy can contain or sustain . . . [and] there comes a point in time in growth when any parasite will destroy its host."

That statement seems far truer today than nearly any time in my memory. What Albert Jay Nock once called "octopean government" has seemingly grown even more appendages and uses them more aggressively against citizens. Calling socialism a parasite on the economy is insightful because it helps us see how socialism resists planned efforts to displace it. "Consider socialism's double-barreled definition: the state ownership and control of the *means* and/or the *results* of production. Give it entry into any area and socialism insinuates itself into the warp and woof of the activity; it becomes embedded in the mores, the traditions, the way of life. Immediately there develops a stubborn vested interest to assure its continuance; it infects the economic, social, and political bloodstream."

Read turns to the thorny question of how to successfully rid ourselves of this parasite.

> How are we to break out of . . . any of the . . . many socializations? . . . Thousands are asking how to engineer the dismantling of this labyrinthine growth, but not a one can blueprint the procedure; none ever will. Drafting a plan for riddance of socialism is like trying to find a formula for unscrambling an egg.

He then explains why a socialistic centralized plan will not work to defeat socialistic parasitism.

> Escape is predicated on . . . dismiss[ing] the thought of engineering or planning socialism's uprooting, and . . . an expanding appreciation of how a seeming chaos of initiatives and skills will miraculously combine, when free to do so, into ordered patterns of creative phenomena. In short, a growing

> comprehension of the miracle of the free market—a comprehension all too rare today.

Using the example of designing mail delivery in a free market, Read goes further.

> Unable to think how *he* would deliver mail . . . unable to *design or engineer* the project in his own mind—that is, being unaware of how the market really works—he will likely draw the socialistic conclusion: . . . Mail delivery is a job for government. . . . No one person can or ever will attain to such comprehension. . . . Free market mail delivery would be accomplished, not by any master-minding but in precisely the same manner as has voice delivery and all other creative phenomena: millions of tiny "think-of-thats," in a chaos which defies cataloguing, ending up in the fantastic order of an automobile or a jet plane or whatever!

It is this seemingly chaotic order—that is, not subject to anyone's unilateral control—that has advanced general well-being, not the unilateral control that undermines it. "Natural and spontaneous configurations of creative ideas account for our economic and social blessings."

But no one knows how to correct all the socialist errors that have crept into almost every nook and cranny of society. Once individual property rights are protected, all it takes for voluntary arrangements is the agreement of those whose rights are involved. But the web of socialistic restrictions hinder efforts to produce nonparasitic results from many directions.

> The point we must bear in mind is that socialism itself is but the political outcropping of a plurality of false ideas, notions, passions, plausibilities and emotions . . . all the way from doing good to feathering one's own nest—all at the expense of others! To conclude that anyone can engineer or blueprint the eradication of these errors is no more valid than to believe that someone knows how to make a jet plane or to deliver mail. Plan an erasure of these myriad misconceptions from the minds of millions of unknown persons? . . . To fasten the eye on a design or an organized scheme or a blueprint to bring about socialism's demise is to fritter away one's time and energy.

He suggests that rather than trying to plan the demise of socialism, we should instead focus on building a good society.

> A good society cannot emerge from the drafting board. Rather, the good society is a dividend which automatically flows from *antecedent* virtues and talents. . . . And the shrinking or the withering away of socialism will come about, if at all, as a natural by-product of numerous antecedent actions that are meritorious in and of themselves. . . .
>
> Unsound ideas lead to socialism, just as sound ideas make for the good society. . . .
>
> . . . Unsound ideas will produce their bad fruit until sound ideas prove acceptable. In short, its largely a matter of displacement or replacement. Any idea, right or wrong, will revert to an insignificant role if the value judgements of men do not approve it.

How does focusing on a good society displace socialistic errors?

> Unsound ideas will lose authority whenever their intellectual source peters out, that is, whenever the intellectual source of sound ideas attains a dominant position. . . . Socialism will shrink into historical oblivion whenever little or nothing is done to preserve it. . . .
>
> . . . With the unsound ideas which underlie socialism: take no steps to preserve them but, instead, fasten attention on the sound ideas which give support to the free market and the good society. When we pursue high purposes, natural forces do their clean-up work for us as a dividend for having set our sights aright.
>
> We do not need to know how to mastermind or blueprint the unscrambling of socialism; we need to know little else than how to win Nature as an ally. . . . With men of good faith, she will cooperate.

Leonard Read believes that a single plan to eliminate socialism everywhere would be a pipe dream because no one knows enough to make such a plan effective. In contrast, better ideas and better results from freely chosen, voluntary arrangements can prevent parasitic governments from draining our lives, liberties, and properties and inspire similar efforts. It is still a daunting task, but only principles of self-ownership and freedom, held in the minds and hands of principled adherents, make it possible at all.

24.

The Good within Our Reach

It is often asserted that we should cooperate rather than compete in society. For instance, FDR said, "Competition has been shown to be useful up to a certain point, but cooperation, which is the thing we must strive for today, begins where competition leaves off" (Roosevelt 1912). Bertrand Russell expresses it even more sharply: "The only thing that will redeem mankind is cooperation" (Russell 1954).

But such views, now as well as then, tend to falsely understand competition and cooperation as either-or choices. Many supposedly cooperative ventures actually reduce social cooperation. Market competition, however, provides a peaceful process that *expands* it.

Leonard Read is fully aware of our mutual dependence on cooperation—our interdependence. He addresses the theme in "The Good within Our Reach," from his 1981 book *How Do We Know?* (Read 1981a).

> Suppose there were no coming together, each individual dependent solely on his or her own thoughts and productivity. . . . All would starve! . . . Merely ask yourself, whoever you may be, how well you would prosper were you dependent on only that which you know how to do. . . .
>
> Why is coming together a beginning? Because it results in a pooling of our specializations. . . . We have become interdependent; each of us is dependent on the unique specializations of others and *freedom to exchange*. . . .
>
> There is no question that *working together leads to success*.

Read understands market competition as an essential means to expand and improve cooperation rather than threaten or hinder it. Market competition is a discovery process that reveals what would otherwise be unknowable: who will cooperate best with one another and how they will cooperate across uncountable individual choices and interactions. Those who cooperate more effectively with others earn greater rewards. And the stronger the competition for consumer patronage and employees, the more such cooperation develops.

> The problem is to maintain the freedom to cooperate and to compete. . . .
>
> . . . A noted professor . . . at a leading college condemned the market economy on the ground that cooperation was good, competition bad. What a fallacy! Example: When bakers of bread compete, the one who provides the best—highest quality at the lowest price—is the one with whom *we cooperate*. Competition and cooperation are twin virtues and when strictly observed they form what might well be called "The thank you society." When buying a loaf of bread . . . I say "Thank you" because I want the bread more than the money. The grocer says "Thank you" because he wants the money more than the bread. This is the free market at the bread-and-butter level!

He contrasts his understanding of competition as a means to improved cooperation with a failed government attempt at forced cooperation that he had lived through.

> The present situation is remindful of the ideological slump during the early days of the New Deal: the National Industrial Recovery Act—the NRA or the Blue Eagle—became law. Top business leaders and their national organizations endorsed this fantastic set of strangling controls over the economy. . . . Why this anti-free market position? . . . One [reason] was the hope of being rid of dreaded competition.

The NRA was a bust. Growing opposition culminated in the Supreme Court ruling that it was unconstitutional, but that process was impeded by arguments for phasing out its restrictions to avoid harming the economy (of course, some of those arguments came from those who gained from the restrictions). In contrast, Read argued for the opposite: ending the abuses of liberty would rapidly restore the ability to voluntarily expand cooperation.

> However, after a year of this politico-economic nonsense, business leaders and their organizations reversed their position, but some dragged their feet. Abbreviated, their reasoning ran like this: "We must be rid of this political monstrosity, but let us eliminate it gradually. To get rid of it suddenly would wreck the economy."

> Getting rid of what's wrong *gradually* is a nonsensical tactic. . . . Restore what's right *right now*! And that is what happened to NRA in May, 1935, with the Supreme Court's famous "Chicken Case" decision. As of that moment every phase of NRA was abolished, not an iota of it remained. The wrong abolished *suddenly*! Did the economy go smash? To the contrary, citizens went suddenly to work. . . . The opportunity of working together was increased.

Ending the NRA restrictions immediately restarted voluntary cooperation in the market. And restoring the freedom to offer superior goods, services, and organizational approaches in peaceful, voluntary arrangements led to far better results. But many learned nothing from that object lesson. "Only a few learned the lesson and came to an understanding of how the free and unfettered market works its wonders for one and all!"

Leonard Read reinforces his lesson with the example of the NRA, which shows how rhetoric about "working together for mutual benefit" is often a cover for damage to competition, the undermining of cooperation, and the loss of liberty. He sees that what Friedrich Hayek calls the "extended order" of competition in the marketplace improves outcomes. Requiring the consent of all whose rights are involved (a constraint absent in political determination) forces competition into beneficial channels and offers better possibilities for everyone.

Market competition improves cooperation because everyone is free to offer their cooperation under whatever terms they find acceptable. The process rewards those most able to satisfy consumer desire, however weak their political power (a weakness that is often exploited), which improves results for themselves and for those dealing with them.

Contrary to those who assert that cooperation is superior to competition, only relationships based on the voluntary exchange of private property (i.e., capitalism) exclude coercion and allow true voluntary cooperation. The goal of this cooperation is not to eliminate competition but to channel it into forms that have been mutually agreed on. Rather than condemning the market as the antithesis of cooperation, Read recognizes, along with Ludwig von Mises (who joined FEE at its very beginning, urged to do so by Henry Hazlitt), that competitive markets comprise "a system of mutual cooperation," where "the function of competition is to assign to every member of the social system that position in which he can best serve the whole of society and all of its members" (Mises 1998).

We are once again in a time when self-proclaimed political saviors are shilling for government and imposing "cooperation" at the expense of Americans' rights and liberties (e.g., the Biden administration has pushed for almost every special advantage for labor unions ever dreamed up). Such "cooperation" undermines real, voluntary cooperation that evolves through market competition. Revisiting Read's thoughts on advancing "the good within our reach" can help us to defend our rights, liberties, and well-being.

25.

Justice versus Social Justice

There was a time when people had a far better understanding of justice than we do today. What is the traditional American view of justice? The Declaration of Independence asserts the individual's inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Justice, in that case, is almost entirely a matter of defending negative rights—that is, freedom from encroachment on our inalienable rights. The government is supposed to protect citizens from encroachments on their rights (e.g., by defending property rights against force and fraud), including from those committed by government itself. Such negative rights, which can be upheld for everyone at the same time, are described by the Bill of Rights.

Over time, this understanding of rights as freedoms from abuse has given way to a notion of positive rights—that is, rights to receive things (e.g., housing, food, education, and income). But to implement a right to receive something from government requires the violation of the negative rights of others. This is because the government has no resources except what it takes from others, usually without their consent. Further, such positive rights cannot be upheld for everyone at the same time. Giving someone something not acquired through voluntary arrangements means reducing another's ability to acquire the same thing.

The erosion of negative rights to give positive rights to some—violating the traditional understanding of justice—has recently been rationalized by the language of *social justice*, which hides its violation of universal justice (i.e., a government of equal laws rather than favoritism for some over others) by keeping the word *justice* but adding a modifier.

Leonard Read, one of history's most prolific defenders of liberty, recognizes this battle between negative and positive rights, and the huge but hidden transformation it involved, for what it was. In "Justice versus Social Justice," from his 1973 book *Who's Listening?* (Read 1973), he analyzes the conflict, starting with Aristotle's definition of justice, in powerful terms. Since the battle is still playing out, and real justice and negative rights are losing, Read's understanding can help us turn the tide.

> What is justice? "Justice is the end of government. It is the end of civil society." This conclusion by James Madison

(*Federalist* No. 51) also suits me. . . . Justice and so-called social justice are opposites and to promote the latter is to retard the former.

. . . Only individuals experience justice or injustice. . . . Justice cannot be rendered to everyone in general, only to each one in particular.

. . . Justice prevails in personal relations, that is, in the absence of injustice. Understood in this manner, justice is indeed the end of civil society.

Government in its ideal concept can have no other end than a common justice, for this is the end of civil society of which government is the arm or agent. The Goddess of Justice is blindfolded; if she peeks, she cheats. . . . This is the meaning of "A government of laws, not of men." . . .

. . . I have a moral right to my life, livelihood, liberty. Is this just? Yes, if one can concede a similar right to every other individual. I can! Try it in reverse: I have a moral right to take the life, livelihood, liberty of another. Just? Only if I can rationally concede the right of murder, theft, enslavement to everyone else. I cannot concede this right to anyone; thus, it is neither good nor just.

The institution of freedom, if properly defined, suffices to render justice to each individual. John Stuart Mill said: "The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of *pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs*, or impede their efforts to obtain it." . . .

We now come to what is euphemistically referred to as social justice, though it is in theory and practice the very opposite of justice . . . It is . . . a device that politicians and social planners find convenient to gain votes and power. Social justice has no case except the lust for position; it has no rational content and simply manifests the little-god syndrome.

In the practice of so-called social justice, the individual is ignored. . . .

Social justice is the game of "robbing selected Peter to pay for collective Paul." This form of political behavior seeks the gain of some at the expense of others. . . . It is

> the thwarting of justice that begs our censure. Test social justice . . . to perceive the difference.
>
> . . . If you would not condone others coercively taking from you to feather their nests, you could not, perforce, take from them to feather your own. . . .
>
> . . . Social justice involves . . . depriving others to gain one's ends.
>
> . . . Social justice promises to reward the idle by punishing and restraining those who have exercised creative energy.
>
> So-called social justice is man's greatest injustice to man, antisocial in every respect; not the cement of society, but the lust for power and privilege and the seed of man's corruption and downfall.
>
> Finally, social justice in no way fits the claim of its advocates: an expression of mercy and pity. These virtues are strictly personal attributes and are expressed only in the voluntary giving of one's own, never in the seizure and redistribution of someone else's possessions.
>
> Morally and ethically motivated citizens can condone a philosophy of so-called social justice only if they fail to see its terrible injustice.

If people thought as carefully as Read does about the massive misrepresentation of justice that claims of social justice entail, we would not be so far down the path of eviscerating justice in the name of a "new and improved" justice. Having moved down that path, the only route to improvement is to recognize the rhetorical cheat and reverse course. Read's contrast between justice and social justice is a good start in undoing the "progressive" redefinition (or, better, misdefinition) of justice.

26.

Social Reformers as Keepers of the Peace

"Three city blocks were systematically burned to the ground as hundreds of the local police stood by and viewed the violence. They were obeying orders not to harm the arsonists. The National Guard was called, adding more armed watchers. A passive gendarmerie consorting with open rebellion has rarely been seen in American history, until recently. Except for variation in detail and numbers, this sort of thing is happening today." This could easily have been written today, but Leonard Read wrote it in "Social Reformers as Keepers of the Peace," from his 1969 book *The Coming Aristocracy* (Read 1969a). The essay offers keen insights that are relevant to America's recent turmoil and violence by analyzing the relationship between what political candidates promise and their ability to keep the peace.

> These increasing depredations . . . pose the question: Have we of the "free world" lost the art of keeping the peace and, if so, why? What really lies at the root of this rampaging violence? . . .
>
> . . . A good part of the blame rests upon the electorate which has put social reformers into Federal, state, and local government office.
>
> Keeping the peace is the highly specialized task of government, and social reformers are peculiarly unqualified to perform this function; they are agitators, not peacemakers. When it comes to keeping the peace, social reformers are misfits—deplorable failures!
>
> . . . We are electing reformers to city councils, state legislatures, the Congress, and to top administrative posts. This being the case, is it any wonder that the rioters go unrestrained? The mobsters are among the clients of these agitators for change . . . and all too often in a manner consistent with the avowed policies of the social reformers.

What makes social reformers "peculiarly unqualified" to keep the peace?

> How can we tell whether a candidate for public office is a social reformer? By simply listening to his platform, the things he intends to do if elected.
>
> If a candidate so much as mentions what he is going to do for some group or class or minority or locality with other people's money, that is, if he proposes to feather the nests of some at the expense of others, he must be classified as a social reformer, and an unprincipled one, at that. These reformers promise to do good things, not voluntarily with the fruits of their own labor, but through the use of coercion; they rely on the force of government to achieve their ends; they coercively expropriate the fruits of your labor and mine to do their "good."
>
> . . . These politically-oriented reformers who would apply coercion . . . eloquently boast of what they intend to do . . . [and] which of them can do the most for us with our money. . . . Naive voters, taken in by this nonsense, are the ones at fault. They are fascinated by the prospects of "social gains"—and greatly disappointed when those who promise such gains fail to keep the peace!

In response to the expanding violations of rights on behalf of potential political clients, Read insists that "America politically is off course!" Why?

> There remains only a vestige of the idea that the role of government is to keep the peace; in its stead is the notion that the force implicit in government is to implement social reform. Thus, the political debates are less concerned with keeping the peace than disturbing it; the argument is over the best way to use coercion to redistribute earnings and savings acquired peacefully through production and exchange. So long as this redistributionist sentiment prevails, social reformers will vie with each other to accommodate the sentiment. We are not likely, under these conditions, to find individuals vying with each other to keep the peace.

How do we get back on course?

> Any change for the better must originate in the minds of voters as a more realistic appreciation of the essence of government. To know the nature of government is the first step in knowing what not to ask of it.

> *The essential characteristic of government is organized force!* . . .
>
> . . . Organized force can . . . inhibit, prohibit, penalize, restrain, suppress.
>
> Organized force cannot be an agency for creativity . . . discovery, invention, intuition, inquisitiveness, insight.
>
> With these points in mind, we can logically deduce the proper role of government by merely asking: What in good conscience should be prohibited, penalized, suppressed? The answer has been given in the moral codes: the destructive actions of men such as violence, fraud, predation, misrepresentation. . . . Limit government to this policing function, for here is its principled role. The balance of the message comes just as clearly: never use force to achieve a creative end, be it housing, power and light, education, medicine, welfare, security, prosperity, charity. Leave these desirable achievements to the creativity which can flourish among men only when they are free!

How would this realign the political compass?

> Were government limited to its principled role, as opposed to the statist or social-reformer concept, officials at all levels would concern themselves with the codification of the thou-shalt-nots and their enforcement. Common justice—everyone equal before the law as before God—would be their hallmark. We, the voters, would judge candidates on their sense of justice, on their ability to maintain a fair field and no favor, on their competence at writing prohibitive law, and on their skills in keeping peace and order.
>
> . . . Speeches would bear little resemblance to what candidates are promising today. . . .
>
> Men with the potential statesmanship so sorely required . . . will be drawn from obscurity . . . when an audience exists, and not before . . . persons who understand the difference between a government of social reformers and a government to keep peace and order—with a strong preference for the latter. . . . We shall hear answers to our hopes and prayers when we know what to ask for.

What would such a major reorientation require of American citizens?

> There is no place for social reformers in governmental posts, for these positions endow them with coercive power which they mistakenly use to achieve their 'reforms.' Reform, to be meaningful, is a volitional turn for the better to which coercion is obviously antagonistic. We need to bring from obscurity the potential statesmen who can keep the peace. To effect such change requires little more of us—the people—than a reasonable sense of justice and a knowledge of what government should and should not do.

Leonard Read's proposal for political improvement would limit government to providing mutual benefits rather than unearned benefits for some at the undeserved and involuntary expense of others. In a sense, it would not require that much from Americans. We have stooped to our current political malfeasance because too many have honored Read's advice only in the breach.

Reestablishing "a reasonable sense of justice and a knowledge of what government should and should not do" is a very long step. Taking it also requires a widespread will to act appropriately on that knowledge, even when doing so threatens one's place at the trough of political power and resources. Read spent much of his life advocating moral and practical reasons to do exactly that. Yet we seem to be further away from that goal today, with no groundswell of people willing to both hear and act on the lesson. For those who reject coercion, however, the only way to achieve liberty is by clear explanation and persuasion.

27.

The Role of Rules

"There seems to be considerable confusion about the nature and purpose of rules." That is how Leonard Read begins "The Role of Rules," from his 1972 book *To Free or Freeze: That Is the Question* (Read 1972a), after quoting Epictetus: "The first and most necessary topic in philosophy is the practical application of principles"—that is, we need to apply rules based on valid philosophical principles. He then clarifies the relationship between principles and rules and distinguishes between two different types of rules.

> The principle of a thing is a verbal formulation of its nature and its workings; a rule is a homely guide to action deduced from the principle. There are good rules and bad rules precisely as there are true and false principles. A good rule: 'Do not unto others that which you would not have them do unto you.' A bad rule: 'The king can do no wrong.'

In other words, good rules are based "on the ground" of real human interactions, while bad rules arise from false principles. In the example above, the first rule derives from the principle that humans have rights that no one else can abrogate (e.g., "all men are created equal before the law"), while the second rule derives from the principle that the ruler has the right to override everyone else's rights (e.g., "the divine right of kings," the rejection of which helped pave the path of increasing freedom).

Here, we run up against a knowledge problem. No one can understand the full implication of every principle, so concrete application will always somewhat exceed the ability of an individual. But we often know enough or agree enough about a rule to find its application worthwhile. For instance, deists, believers in a more active God, and nonbelievers may all agree that our shared humanity justifies equal treatment of one another, even if they don't agree about why this justifies it. "No one knows precisely how to explain gravitation, yet many of us know that it works and we frame countless rules accordingly. . . . To disregard these rules is to court disaster. . . . Most of us are unaware of many . . . principles. . . . Had we no way of abiding by principles except as we understand them, man would perish from the earth."

No other kind of rule has a greater impact than that which limits the ability of people to impose their wills on others. Rules can protect us from those who, falsely thinking they know more than others, believe they can improve lives through coercion.

> Over and over again we witness geniuses in their particular specializations assuming a knowledge of areas in which they have no competence . . . follow him in political economy and become enslaved. Specialization, when coupled with man's arrogance, leads toward such danger.
>
> What then is our saving grace? Rules! Do not touch a red hot stove or a live wire; do not jump out of a plane without a parachute; do not cheat, lie, steal, kill; do not feather your own nest at the expense of others. I do not have to know that "The volume of a gas varies inversely as the pressure" to avoid a bomb exploding in my face. I only need to know the rule, "Don't play with bombs."

For the realm of human actions and interactions, Read makes an important distinction between self-imposed rules for action and rules imposed externally to protect others from antisocial actions.

> . . . What is the nature of these rules? There are two divisions—poles apart and each requiring its distinct kind of obedience. Rules in the first category . . . consist in practicing self-discipline; those in the second . . . consist in submitting to external authority.
>
> Take the Golden Rule, which is a maxim in the first category. . . . If one is intelligent enough to see the wisdom of this rule and if he has the strength of character to heed it, he obeys. Otherwise, not! Each individual makes his own decision to obey or not. . . .
>
> The Commandment, "Thou shalt not covet," is but another of countless ethical and moral rules—a rule that is obeyed or not as the individual chooses. . . . In these matters each decides on the rules to be accepted or rejected and he prospers or fails in life's purpose according to how intelligently he identifies the rules and obeys them.
>
> Once we recognize our shortcomings in understanding and obeying these ethical and moral rules and guidelines . . . we must conclude that man by nature is imperfect. . . . We

> will, to some extent, offend the rights of others. Perfect harmony in society is not possible. . . . And pronounced indeed is the disharmony caused by those who have no scruples—no rules of their own!
>
> This poses the necessity for rules of the second kind . . . meant to take effect if and when moral laws are ignored or violated; they are designed to cope with the antisocial as distinguished from the peaceful actions of citizens, that is, with those actions which cause injury to others . . . rules, which if properly drawn and obeyed, would assure a fair field and no favor. In this category of rules, we are expected to obey not necessarily what our conscience suggests but, rather, what an external authority dictates. As distinguished from moral law, this is civil law; it punishes those who trespass against their fellows, but it presupposes that there are men who behave ethically a good part of the time.

He concludes that civil law is necessary because of moral and ethical shortcomings but comes with serious risks.

> It is utter folly to believe that there can be a good society without the rule of law—civil law, that is. Yet, this category of rules is loaded with the possibility for evil as well as good results. Civil law can, and often does, lead to total statism—enslavement—or it can, but rarely does, lead to securing individual liberty. Nonetheless, the free society is out of the question in the absence of civil law; to have even the remotest chance of the good society requires that we assume the risk that civil law might go askew. To achieve the best, we must face and overcome grave dangers.

The reality of the need for civil law, combined with the serious dangers that inhere in it, brings us back to a question of rules: which rules would generate the best results for society?

> Is there . . . a certain narrow course which, if scrupulously followed, would secure liberty to all? . . .
>
> There is . . . and it can be ours if we are not blind to it. . . .
>
> This high road has as its foundation what many early Americans believed . . . that men's rights to life, livelihood, and liberty are endowed by the Creator. These rights are part of our very being. . . . Each man participates in an

> order which confers upon him certain prerogatives which other men should not impair. . . .
>
> This inherent rights principle, affirmed in the Declaration of Independence, has fallen by the wayside so far as comprehension and acceptance are concerned.

What Read calls the high road to the best possible civil society requires rerouting America from its current path and opposing the distortion of the meaning of equality.

> There is, however, an easily misunderstood companion idea in the Declaration that may have led many people astray: ". . . that all men are created equal." This has been seized upon by the Declaration's detractors to "prove" how nonsensical its writers were. . . . Of course men are not equal in a single personal attribute. This is so obvious that the authors of the Declaration took no pains to say so. They were not writing to fools. What they had in mind was the profound idea that *all men are equal before the civil law as they are before God*. This relegates civil law to its proper place. Without this concept of equality before the law, justice is out of the question and civil law is out to get you and me.

Read finds civil law necessary because of our failures to live up to what we say we believe is right. But civil law can lead to abuses, and here the rule of universal equality before the law is necessary for our protection. Government, however, makes its own members and favorites far more equal than the rest of us, to paraphrase George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. What core lesson about our imperfect reality does Read derive from his analysis ?

> It is ridiculous to believe that any set of civil laws can be devised to bring about the good society among a people having no moral and ethical scruples. On the other hand, whenever a first-rate citizenry carelessly permits the civil law to go beyond its principled scope of maintaining the peace of the community, it will deprive them of their liberty and self-responsibility. . . .
>
> Those who aspire to a good society have no manner of realizing their goal except as they (1) understand and obey the basic principles or rules of morality and ethics, and (2) establish and limit the scope of civil law so as to insure liberty and justice for all.

28.

Self-Reform, Not Reformed Coercion

America is constantly being reformed. Unfortunately, from healthcare and insurance to housing and finance, its reforms do not advance the welfare of Americans but only expand the powers government has over them. Few have seen this more clearly than Leonard Read. In his 1970 book *Talking to Myself* (Read 1970), he discusses what truly beneficial reforms require. His clarity of thought, which focuses on self-reform rather than the imposition of reform on others, deserves consideration.

> Each must look inside himself. . . . Thus do individuals "reform" society.
>
> . . . Government affords no cure. . . . When the objective is at the high level of individual freedom, the real action is within the individual. . . .
>
> . . . All actions and all ideas inimical to a free society are destructive. . . .
>
> When the trend is away from, not toward, a free society . . . the drift is marked by a decline in human virtue. . . .
>
> . . . We're off course any time any peaceful individual is denied the full use of his own faculties and resources. . . .
>
> . . . [When] Politicians who promise [majorities] what they want are easily elected to positions of power over the resources of everyone . . . justice is out of the question, and an essentially free society impossible. . . .
>
> . . . Freedom affords justice, whereas socialism does not and cannot. . . .
>
> . . . I cannot allow my own pet exception to freedom without allowing others their pet *buts*. . . . To stand for one socialistic item . . . is for me to give away the case for freedom. . . .
>
> . . . Can I forcibly take the fruits of your labor . . . without committing a crime? I cannot. . . . Urgency or personal need no more warrants coercive force on the part of government than on my part. . . .

. . . What actions of men should be inhibited. . . . Only fraud, misrepresentation, predation; that is, all destructive actions of some against others. . . .

. . . Nothing but ill can flow from plundering others and redistributing the loot. . . .

. . . The only reason for the feeble present condition of our faith in this voluntary behavior is that voluntarism has been largely deadened by governmental takeover. . . .

. . . Let government codify and enforce the taboos against destructive actions; leave everything creative to men acting freely. . . .

Free and self-responsible men are as good as imperfect men can be. . . . Those who are coerced—they'll behave irresponsibly. . . .

Trust freedom? In the society of men there is nothing else to trust! . . .

Only when it becomes second nature for man to behave in a manner consonant with freedom will freedom be secure. . . .

. . . I may do whatever suits my personal fancy so long as no offense is done to what I owe others. . . .

. . . I cannot do as I please by using either private or governmental coercion. . . .

Whenever I assume that the welfare of others is my problem . . . I am denying to them self-responsibility, the most precious of human possessions. . . .

The right to do as I please is restricted enough by observing ethical and moral principles. . . . Beyond these limitations . . . leave me free to do as I please lest my individuality be shorn away . . . rather than improved and expanded. . . .

The self-responsible man is, by definition, a free man. He could not be free were others responsible for him. . . .

. . . In a society of self-responsible and free men, self-interest draws the virtues into practice. . . .

Some problems in life cannot be delegated. . . . One's integrity cannot. One's conscience cannot. And, one's freedom cannot. . . .

> . . . Advancement of freedom is not a matter of *who* wields political power. . . . It depends upon the disassembling of such power. . . .
>
> . . . Any person aware of his limitations has nothing he wishes to impose on others. . . .
>
> When people do not know how little they know, they'll effectuate their nonsense by force.

Lovers of liberty owe a debt to Leonard Read. He sees that coercive "reforms" undermine liberty and therefore refuses to support them. Defending our liberty today requires taking that lesson to heart. Instead of imposing reform on others, liberty requires that we reform ourselves to be responsible—that is, unwilling to coerce others. And that is the only reliable path to the improvement of society.

29.

Natural Aristocracy as the Cure for Kakistocracy

Americans hear mountains of praise for democracy, but few use the word "republic" anymore to describe their country. As a result, many overlook how democracy differs from and how it can even override a republic. Leonard Read, in his 1977 book *Awake for Freedom's Sake* (Read 1977), provides insight into this distinction that we seem to have all but forgotten and observes that our democracy is turning into a kakistocracy.

Read defines kakistocracy as "a government by the worst men," perhaps echoing Friedrich Hayek's "Why the Worst Get on Top," the title of a chapter in *The Road to Serfdom*, with a tip of the hat to James Russell Lowell's 1876 formulation, "a government . . . for the benefit of knaves at the cost of fools" (Scudder 1901).

> Its definition is included in only a few of the larger dictionaries: "A government by the worst men." One of them adds: ". . . opposed to aristocracy." And that calls to mind Jefferson's view: "There is a natural aristocracy among men; the grounds of this are virtues and talents."
>
> I like Lowell's definition of kakistocracy. What it boils down to is a government by the worst of men, for the benefit of rogues, paid for by simpletons! Is our once-upon-a-time Republic falling into this nonsense? My purpose is to highlight our kakistocratic tendencies and to offer a few thoughts as to how they can be halted and reversed.

How do we get from a republic to kakistocracy by way of democracy? Democracy does play a role in a republic since citizens democratically determine their government's representatives. But what is more important to a constitutional republic are the constitutional limits on what the political agents can decide on behalf of the people. Their authority should only extend to those areas that have been delegated to them. In contrast, "democracy" leaves as undefined the issues that are to be decided by majority rule. To democratically decide issues that lie beyond a republic's legiti-

mate boundaries is to assault rather than assist the citizens. The possibility of controlling and benefiting from that destructive process is the impetus that leads to kakistocracy.

John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, which was influential in America's founding, lays out the boundaries that separate a constitutional republic from a democracy that is tending toward kakistocracy. Locke asserts that "the end of law . . . is to preserve and enlarge freedom . . . from restraint and violence by others" (Locke 1690). He proposes a state existing to advance the welfare of *all* its citizens (the plain meaning of advancing the general welfare) as the only type of government all members of a society would voluntarily join.

What could a government do if it was restricted to advancing the general welfare of its citizens—that is, to helping citizens achieve what they have agreed they cannot do by themselves? There is only one essential thing, which derives from the "natural right" of individuals: defend the citizens and their property. The efficacy of self-ownership is limited because an individual defending his rights against violation could be overwhelmed by superior force; therefore, "the preservation of property being the end of government, and that for which men enter society," joining together to defend our property would make everyone more secure and thereby expand the voluntary arrangements which immensely benefit us.

The list of Lockean government activities is short, essentially limited to protecting us and our property from foreign attack (national defense) and from similar assaults by our neighbors (police, courts, and prisons). Otherwise, we are best left to allocate our own resources because we know and care more about ourselves than government does. We are also less capable than government of coercing others to bear the cost of what we want.

Government actions beyond defending our rights will always benefit some at the expense of others. Since, in Locke's words, "the supreme power cannot take from any man any part of his property without his own consent," then, whenever that limit is violated, "by this breach of trust they forfeit the power the people had put into their hands for quite contrary ends."

Joint determination, beyond that which benefits all, inherently entails coercion of unwilling citizens and violations of their rights; therefore, it cannot advance their common interests. Leonard Read finds that the most common violations reflect the "redistributionist philosophy."

> A communist society, to my way of thinking, qualifies as a kakistocracy. Its coercive theme, "from each according to his

> ability, to each according to his need," strikingly parallels a form of government in which knavery exploits ignorance. . . .
>
> Regardless of the descriptive term-communism, socialism, the welfare state, or the planned economy—the redistributionist philosophy in practice presupposes the existence of three classifications of individuals, the typical specimens being: (1) the person with ability, that is, the one from whom honestly earned property is taken, (2) the person with "need," that is, the one to whom someone else's property is given, and (3) the person in command of the instruments of coercion, that is, the authoritarian.

The last classification—authoritarian—provides the impetus for kakistocracy.

> The coercionist who forcibly takes from some and gives to others . . . exemplifies both knavery and foolishness. . . . He can be and often is motivated by the thirst for power or popular acclaim or a mixed-up sense of social justice. To feather one's own nest, that is, to gain self-satisfaction at the expense of others, regardless of the motivation, is knavery, pure and simple.
>
> Foolishness shows forth in the coercionist in that he *unintelligently* interprets his own interest. He fails to see that he cannot develop, emerge, improve himself while he is riding herd over others. The coercionist who has you on your back, holding you down, is just as permanently fastened on top of you as you are under him. In that sense, the slave owner is enslaved, as is the slave.

As Read sees it, authoritarians benefit themselves with power, acclaim, and self-satisfaction forcibly extracted from others. This is "knavery, pure and simple," as well as foolishness (or a fool's errand), because coercion cannot advance but only sharply erode the general welfare. Modern politics focuses almost exclusively on putting together political majorities, forcing others to accede out of respect for the false god of democracy, all in order to enable such knavery and foolishness.

How much of the power of our current leaders has come from their promising "something for nothing" to some while failing to mention the required "nothing for something" deals imposed on others? Can we rule out that the answer is "every time"? How many "crises" and "emergencies" have

they made up to justify what is unjustifiable and beyond what the Constitution permits? How many times have they claimed to care more about the future than others to justify coercing Americans, then burdened the future with massive deficits, unfunded liabilities, and regulatory hobbles, impoverishing coming generations? How much have they preened about "delivering the goods," especially at election time, after having stolen them with government's coercive power? How many problems have they actually solved, how many have they promised to solve, and how many new problems have they caused in their inept attempts to do so?

What can we do about our government's kakistocratic tendencies beyond recognizing and feeling depressed about them? Read finds the answer in Thomas Jefferson's "natural aristocracy."

> Is there a cure for this devastating trend? . . . The rebirth of a natural aristocracy—virtues and talents—is the answer. . . . When a society is graced with a first-rate aristocracy—men of virtues and talents serving as exemplary models—foolish and knavish notions are held in abeyance. Why? People fear appearing as fools or knaves before those held in high esteem.

Here, Read repeats one of the most common themes in his writing: self-improvement is the most effective means to social improvement. The more knowledge, skills, insight, and wisdom I have to offer, the better off are all those who deal with me. Furthermore, kakistocratic charlatans will be less successful in fooling and worsening the lives of myself and all those who have learned from me. And unlike so many "reform" proposals, self-improvement doesn't violate anyone else's liberty and property.

> When and to what extent will you or I strive for this required exemplarity—becoming an aristocrat? This, and this alone, is all any person can do toward ridding the world of kakistocracy. And why not strive for this role? Seeking for righteousness, learning to understand and explain why freedom works its wonders is a joyous adventure.

For Read, that "joyous adventure" is also a great service to society because, as he says in "In Pursuit of Excellence," from *Anything That's Peaceful* (Read 1964a), "virtue and talents, the natural enemies of ignorance, knavery, foolishness, malevolence, must be perpetually flowering to hold these evils in check."

30.

Elements of Libertarian Leadership

Leonard Read was an important leader in the libertarian movement because of his unwavering commitment to liberty as well as his belief that not all forms of leadership and education are effective and consistent with liberty. He deals with this issue throughout his work, but it is the main topic of his 1962 book *Elements of Libertarian Leadership* (Read 1962b).

At a time when America's political leadership is ineffective and does not work to enhance citizens' liberty, it is worth reconsidering Read's words. Six decades ago, he could already say that "our waning individual liberty is more difficult to restore than most people judge."

> The solution to the problem of rescuing an individual liberty on the skids requires, broadly speaking, the mastery of two disciplines: the philosophy of freedom and the methodology of freedom. The former has to do with an understanding of what freedom actually is, and the latter with the techniques, means, and methods by which an improved state of freedom may be effected. . . .
>
> . . . Right method . . . consists of self-improvement. If everyone were devoted to the perfection of self, there could be no meddlers amongst us, and without meddlers there could be no socialism.

If people followed Read's path of "perfection of self," there would be no meddlers or socialism.

> Liberty . . . does not and cannot include any action, regardless of sponsorship, which lessens the liberty of a single human being. . . . Unrestraint carried to the point of impairing the liberty of others is the exercise of license, not liberty. To minimize the exercise of license is to maximize the area of liberty. Ideally, government would restrain license, not indulge in it; make it difficult, not easy; disgraceful, not popular. A government that does otherwise is licentious, not libertarian. . . .

> . . . To do as one pleases, if it infringes upon the freedom of another, is not freedom at all—its tyranny. It is impossible for freedom to be composed of freedom negations. Total freedom . . . as relating to society and government, is the ideal to be sought. This is a goal to be kept uppermost in mind, and any deviations from it are to be disapproved. . . .
>
> . . . A philosophy which concedes that each individual is an end in himself is a philosophy that precludes the practice of the few using the many as means. . . .
>
> . . . Freedom depends on you. . . . The individual is both its means and its end—the only foundation of freedom, and also its crowning object.

But ruling out certain kinds of action is not sufficient if we are to advance liberty in a world where, "in spite of . . . lip service to freedom, our actual liberties continue to dwindle" and "the centralized state makes more and more of our decisions for us."

> Fighting to retain liberty . . . is tantamount to fighting for life itself. . . .
>
> . . . It is useless to name all the various panaceas . . . aimed at the mere preservation of individual freedom. For we cannot preserve that which has already been so largely lost. We have a restoration job on our hands. Freedom must experience a rebirth in America; that is, we must reestablish it from fundamental principles. . . .
>
> . . . When all of us come to believe that the preservation of liberty is a responsibility that can be delegated, then liberty will have not a single defender. Authoritarians thrive in the absence of libertarian thinking like weeds in the absence of cultivation. . . .
>
> . . . The gospel of freedom cannot be effectively preached from within institutions headed in the socialistic direction. . . . Become a part of their machinery, and it follows that one must not only accommodate himself to, but put his stamp of approval on, the deviations and compromises implicit in such arrangements. . . .
>
> As the belief grows that coercion is the only practical way to get things done . . . the belief in man acting privately, freely, voluntarily, competitively, cooperatively, declines. . . .

> . . . Free men lose faith in themselves when government takes over an activity. . . . A decline in faith in free men and what they can accomplish results in a rising faith in disastrous authoritarianism.

What is the path toward renewed liberty and flourishing freedom?

> The price of freedom [is] an intellectual and spiritual renaissance with all the hard thinking and difficult introspection required to energize such a revolution in thinking. . . .
>
> . . . The . . . price that must be paid for freedom [is] the intellectual and spiritual effort required to grasp the full implications of the idea expressed in these words of the Declaration of Independence: [Men] . . . "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." . . . It . . . denies the state as the endower of men's rights and . . . it follows from a man's inherent right to life that he has a right to sustain his life, the sustenance of life being nothing more nor less than the fruits of one's own labor. . . .
>
> Unless we believe that man's rights are endowments of our Creator and, therefore, inalienable, we must conclude that the rights to life and liberty derive from some human collective and that they are alienable, being at the disposal of the collective will. . . .
>
> . . . This conception makes impossible . . . any ascendancy of government beyond its principled position. It restricts the powers of government to the exercise of such force as any individual is morally warranted in employing. . . . Government, logically, can have no powers beyond those which individuals may properly exercise. . . . Man is free to act creatively or productively as he pleases. Here we have the absence of any and all political restraints on creative action . . . government limited to defense of life and property versus government regulation and control of every aspect of our lives. . . .
>
> . . . Each individual is an end in himself. . . . No other person or set of persons, however organized, has any moral sanction to interfere. . . . No person is warranted in compelling any human being to serve merely as a means to his own ends.

What obstacles must be overcome if a substantial expansion of freedom is to be possible?

> Those who refuse to rule themselves are usually bent on ruling others. . . .
>
> . . . Why is it that a person who obviously cannot manage himself, let alone those who are beholden to him, concludes that he is competent to direct a nation of people or the whole world when even the wisest of men would feel utterly incompetent for any such project. . . .
>
> . . . If the state can grant a man's rights, it can also retract them; that is, it is in control of rights. Freedom of choice as to how one employs himself or what he does with the fruits of his own labor is expanded or contracted according to the caprice of those who have gained command of the political apparatus. . . .
>
> Bad ideas, if they are to be rendered ineffective, must be replaced with good ideas . . . but how few there are who can skillfully, persuasively, and attractively explain authoritarianism's opposite: the free market, private property, limited government philosophy! In the absence of this ability state interventionism thrives. . . .
>
> The ideal society . . . must severely limit its political officialdom, denying it any degree of rulership in the overriding sense. With this done, the leadership must spring from among the people. Unless there emerges in a society an aristocracy of high principle, that society can never be free. . . .
>
> . . . All that retards the development of the human potential is anti-freedom. All that advances the individual's wholeness or completeness as a spiritual, moral, and wise human being is freedom in action.

What are the means of advancing freedom without violating its principles?

> The more destructive the end in view the more fitting are compulsive means, disintegrative methods; the more creative the end in view the more antagonistic to a solution are compulsive methods and the more must reliance be placed on attractive, integrative forces. . . .

> . . . The gaining of wisdom or the understanding of freedom is not imposed by man upon men, nor can it be. It is not marketed or sold. . . .
>
> . . . Logically, we cannot accept as right for ourselves that which we construe to be wrong for everyone else. . . .
>
> . . . Truth, wisdom, an understanding of freedom, an expanding consciousness are the highest of human aims and the methods of attaining them must be of an equally high order. . . .
>
> . . . Physical persuasion—coercion—as a means to broadening an understanding of freedom is patently absurd. . . .
>
> Advancement of libertarian ideals requires that each of us understands that the higher grade the objective, the higher grade must the method be. . . . If the objective be the expansion of another's consciousness or the increasing of his wisdom, then only high-grade methods can be effective. . . .
>
> . . . Liberty can't be saved by those who retire into their ivory towers or take to the hills . . . to bemoan its plight. It is the individual who is active who pushes liberty over the brink—or rescues her. . . .
>
> [Libertarians' lives must exhibit] the power of attraction . . . [which] draws to itself whatever is susceptible to its force. This is at once its merit *and its limitation*. . . .
>
> The omnipotent state—authoritarianism—will not be liquidated except by liberated individuals.

The title of Leonard Read's most famous book, *Anything That's Peaceful*, summarizes the libertarian view in a nutshell: freedom in all things but what infringes on the equal freedom—self-ownership and its implications—of others. *Elements of Libertarian Leadership* was already deeply concerned with how to move toward such a world. Given that Americans have moved far in the opposite direction since then, and that libertarian leadership is thus even more necessary to reverse that course, we could benefit from asking again what such leadership should look like if it is to succeed.

31.

Go Where the Action Is

In my day-to-day interactions, I generally feel closer, as a libertarian, to those who would call themselves conservatives than to those on the left. It is probably because the conservatives I know are far less likely than those on the left to openly and baldly advocate for invading the "life, liberty and estates" (Locke 1690) of others.

While there is often substantial agreement between myself and conservatives in opposing violations of liberty, I have also heard many conservative commentators, when they think an election might be close, attack libertarians with a great deal of vitriol for voting libertarian. To these conservatives, it is an indefensible attack on America to not vote at all—say, because both major parties are far too statist to support—or to vote for a party that advocates and defends liberty far more completely than conservative and not-so-conservative Republicans. This attitude was particularly noticeable during the 2020 US elections. Republicans never seem to recognize that libertarians diverge from their party because its candidates and elected officials propose deviations from and desecrations of liberty.

These thoughts occurred to me upon rereading Leonard Read's "Go Where the Action Is," from his 1970 book *Talking to Myself* (Read 1970), where he reflects on the relationship between libertarians and conservatives. He goes further than my own thoughts on the subject, focusing on how libertarians object to the means conservatives (and alleged conservatives) often utilize in pursuit of political power in their failures to heed the principle that "all actions and all ideas inimical to a free society are destructive." His reflections are worth our own further reflections.

> Strange as it may seem, FEE receives more criticism from "conservatives" than from out-and-out "socialists." . . .
>
> Certainly, it's not because those we call socialists find anything to agree with in the freedom philosophy as we define it; far from that. . . .
>
> Nor is it because our "conservative" critics necessarily find flaws in our philosophical position. Rather, they disagree with the method we commend to advance the practice of freedom, namely, a concentration on improving

the understanding and exposition of each freedom-loving individual. These "conservatives" phrase their scoldings in countless ways, the most pointed being "Why don't you go where the action is?"

. . . We agree with their admonition. . . . But *where* is the action? Our critics think it is out yonder—external, where others are—whereas we believe it is internal—inside each one of us. They insist on reforming the ignoramuses; we say let's look to the flaws in ourselves and see what can be done about that. When the objective is at the high level of individual freedom, the real action is within the individual—not out yonder, not at all.

. . . They fail to draw the distinction between methods useful for destructive purposes and those having creative potentialities. Warfare, for instance, is destructive. If you go where the action is, where do you go? To where the confrontation is: the battlefield. . . . Enlightenment, on the other hand, is in the creative realm. If you want to go where the action is, where do you go? Again, to where the confrontation is: between the self as is and the higher self that might be. Build *me* up! The tactics effective in attaining destructive ends remain destructive, regardless of the objective. Guns are not useful for catching ideas.

. . . All actions and all ideas inimical to a free society are destructive.

Certain methods have an impressive record of achievement when the purpose has been to destroy freedom. All of them are outgoing, exertions *at* others, pushful suasion; they range all the way from selling-the-masses propaganda, to pressure group activity, to name-calling, to political promises, to deceit, to intimidation and terror.

"Conservatives" who do not grasp the nature of this problem observe how effectively these tactics "work" in attaining socialistic or interventionist ends and see no reason why the same tactics won't achieve their ends. The fact that the end they have in view is diametrically opposed to the socialistic end does not seem to warn them that "the end pre-exists in the means;" that the tactics in each case must be consistent with the ends.

Consider our end or objective: an essentially free society. Upon what does that possibility rest? Our aspiration is out of the question unless there be numerous citizens of an intellectual, moral, and spiritual quality to set a sufficiently high standard, to serve as pattern-setters or exemplars. There must be men and women who not only understand why self-responsibility and individual freedom work their wonders, but also men and women who put these virtues into daily practice.

When the trend is away from, not toward, a free society . . . the drift is marked by a decline in human virtue. The trend in the general societal situation, one way or the other, is merely a register of the drift, one way or the other, in personal quality. What is called the social problem boils down to the matter of *individual emergence*.

Individual emergence is not and never will be accomplished by imposition. Not one of the tactics effective in destructive programs is useful here; indeed, these outgoing, reforming efforts do more harm than good. It is difficult enough for oneself to emerge as a better person; impossible to force such change in another. Emergence is exclusively a self-help project; the change is internal, not external.

A remark by our great grandmother comes to mind. At the age of 102 she had been gently reminded, "Granny, you're talking to yourself again." She replied, "At least, I'm talking to a sensible person."

And, what's wrong with that? She was working on the right person, and shared her reflections with anyone who chose to listen.

The present situation may require more and better probing, introspection, talking to ourselves, more skillful sharing. . . . But it is doubtful that the method can be improved.

32.

Smarter Talk Is Smarter Action

Americans have long thought of themselves as people of action. As Leonard Read notes in "How to Gain Liberty," originally published in 1955 (Read 1986), Americans want less talk and more action—or at least they used to—even in situations when people recognize that their liberties are threatened. But what kind of action is appropriate in defense of our liberties?

> Thus speak Americans when they suddenly awaken to the fact that their liberties are endangered. Talk, they say, is useless; only action counts. But perhaps talk and action aren't necessarily opposites. What if studying, talking, writing, and explaining should turn out to be the only worthwhile action there is? What then?

The issue arises because not all actions in response to restrictions on liberty are consistent with liberty—that is, the principle of equal liberty for all rules out many options.

> Do those who would save liberty advocate physical action? If so, how? To use physical force against others, except defensively, is to destroy the liberty of others which, by definition, is not liberty. To adopt this tactic—to employ physical force against others in any form or degree, except in self-defense—would be merely to substitute a new form of compulsion for the existing forms of compulsion, trading violence for violence. . . . Most . . . mean only that they want "something done," and quickly! They want to fight peacefully . . . they reject physical action in their calculations by not even contemplating it. Thus, according to their own thesis, nothing logically remains but intellectual action.

This leads Read to ask a crucial question: "How, then, does one fight for liberty intellectually?" As is often the case with respect to liberty, one must first pay close attention to what should *not* be done (and in our changing, uncertain reality, we often know far more about what not to do—"do not violate your principles"—than the best way to address particular problems).

> The best thing to do even in an intellectual fight for liberty, many think, is to organize—which is a form of action. Usually they think in terms of organizing someone else to do something instead of organizing their own time and energies. This damaging tactic is employed as though organizing had the power, somehow, to absolve individuals from doing any more than joining some organization. This mania for organizing is usually little more than an effort, doubtless unwitting, to transfer responsibility from oneself to some other person or persons. . . .
>
> Responsibility and authority always go hand in hand. Thus, if this process of organizing succeeds, authority over one's own actions is lost precisely in the degree that responsibility is shifted to someone else. The citizen who "wants action," and resorts to this type of tactic, ends up further from his goal than ever. In fact, organizing, more often than not, is merely an attempt to "pass the buck." Yet, oddly enough, the mere act seems to have the strange power of conferring a sense of accomplishment on the ones who organize.

How can one effectively fight for liberty if organizing can itself be dangerous to liberty?

> Organization, though much used, seems to be little understood. In the field of extending individual liberty, organization has strictly limited, technical possibilities. Unless these limitations are scrupulously observed, organization will inflict on liberty more harm than good; thwart, not abet, the spread of understanding. Sobering is the thought that if there were no organization, there could be no socialism!
>
> Organizations can, however, serve a highly useful purpose in developing and spreading an understanding of liberty if organization is confined to its proper sphere. For the purpose of advancing liberty, which depends solely on the advancement of individual understanding, the only usefulness of organization would seem to be to accommodate and to make easier the joint contribution to, participation in, and ownership of the physical assets that will aid in the process . . . [and help] individuals who are attempting to extend

> their understanding of liberty. These physical accommodations can enable searchers for truth to exchange and disseminate ideas and knowledge more effectively. They can be used to secure the advantages which derive from specialization or division of labor. Organization, limited to this form of voluntary cooperation, is a useful and efficient means for achieving these desirable ends.
>
> Organization, however, like government, if extended beyond its proper sphere, becomes positively harmful to the original purpose. This fact constitutes the need for much careful thought on organizational limitation. Just as government becomes dangerous when its coercive, restrictive, and destructive powers are extended into the creative areas, so do voluntary organizations pervert and destroy the benefits of intellect when the capacity to merge is carried to the point of subjecting individual judgments to the will of the majority or group.

If organizing beyond certain very narrow limits is not, as Read puts it, "the best way to secure liberty," then what is?

> Self-improvement is the only practical course to liberty. . . .
>
> Every individual ought to realize that he has not mastered the subject of liberty until he thoroughly understands, and can competently explain, this idea: With government properly limited to its legitimate function of defense, our problems of interdependence can be resolved through voluntary effort, and only through voluntary effort . . . [but] most persons are inexpert in their understanding of this subject.
>
> . . . Not a single person among us is justified in regarding himself other than as a student of liberty. No know-it-all exists or ever will.
>
> . . . For a student of liberty, the search must be within one's self. . . . It is not possible to impart to others that which we do not possess. And even after we have made some progress in understanding, the most we can do for others is to make known to them a willingness to share what we have discovered.

How does this comport with the American tendency toward impatience that often motivates action?

> This search within ourselves may at times appear unrewarding. But if the understanding of liberty is to be advanced, the attempt must be persisted in. . . .
>
> . . . The casual thinker might imagine that the best course is to try to tell others what to do and how to think. But reason supplies a contrary answer. It suggests that pursuit of one's own personal understanding is the only practical action for one to take. If a person advances his own understanding of the true and the false, the understanding thus acquired will be sought by others.
>
> Some persons will assert that . . . this suggested student approach—this process of self-improvement—is too slow to meet the challenge of these times.
>
> . . . But . . . there is no short cut. The only way to truth—that is, to understanding—is through one's own person. When we gain an appreciation of this simple fact, we will be on our way to as little violence against persons, and thus to as much liberty among persons, as is within our power.

How is someone who wishes to advance liberty to reconcile the potential conflict between talk (beliefs, thoughts, opinions, and arguments) and actions (behavior)? In a nutshell, one could say that smarter talk on behalf of liberty is also smarter action on behalf of liberty. "Action? For authoritarians it is physical force. For libertarians it is first understanding and then explanation."

33.

What Should Be Prohibited?

Covid triggered a massive upswing in government prohibitions in America. Many businesses were prohibited from remaining open. Many people were forced to stop working. Many of our normal freedoms of association and travel were eliminated. Many rights—such as access to due process or to contract enforcement—were effectively prohibited. And almost everyone can add to the list from their own experiences.

That rapid increase of government dictation raises a crucial question for Americans: what should we prohibit in society? It is hardly a new question, but we should rethink it because of the ballooning of prohibitions effected with little public conversation about them.

Leonard Read offers insight on this issue in his "Find the Wrong, and There's the Right," from his 1968 book *Accent on the Right* (Read 1968). The key is to focus solely on what we agree is wrong and how we can prevent it. In doing so, we can preserve far more of our rights, our liberty, and the social cooperation they enable than government could by enforcing what it has decided are the "right answers." His insights are worth remembering.

> Those actions which are wrong in social relationships are the ones we should aim to prohibit by personal endeavor, by education and, as a last resort, by society's formal agency of organized force: government. Thus, to analyze what should be prohibited is a means of opening to our vision the infinite realm of righteousness.

What does Read mean by the "infinite realm of righteousness"? If we only prohibited what we agree to be wrong, we would leave open a far vaster array of possibilities for productive and mutually agreeable arrangements than the current bacchanalia of prohibitions forced on us does.

> Socialist and libertarian. . . . What really, in the ideological sense, marks the one from the other? . . . *The difference between the socialist and the libertarian thinker is a difference of opinion as to what others should be prohibited from doing.* . . .
>
> Man . . . does not now possess . . . instinctual do-nots: built-in prohibitions. Instead, he must enjoy or suffer the

consequences of his own free will, his own power to choose between what's right and what's wrong . . . more or less at the mercy of his own imperfect understanding and conscious decisions. The upshot of this is that human beings must choose the prohibitions they will observe. . . .

But in our case, the *observance* of the correct must-nots has survival value only if preceded by a correct, conscious selection of the must-nots . . . by variable, imperfect members of [the human] race. . . .

. . . The most advanced prohibition [is] the Golden Rule. As originally scribed . . . it reads: "Do not do unto others that which you would not have them do unto you." . . . Ever so many people will concede the soundness of the Golden Rule, but only now and then is an individual to be found whose moral nature is elevated to the point where he can observe this do-not in daily living. . . .

Not only does such a person possess a sense of justice but he also possesses its counterpart, a disciplinary conscience. Justice and conscience are two parts of the same emerging moral faculty. . . .

Do not do unto others that which you would not have them do unto you. There is more to this prohibition than first glance reveals. Nearly everyone, for instance, will concede that there is no universal right to kill, to steal, or to enslave—because these practices cannot be universalized, if for no higher reason. But only the person who comprehends this ethic—the Golden Rule—in its wholeness, who has an elevated sense of justice and conscience, will conclude that such a concession denies to him the right to take the life of another, to relieve any person of his livelihood, or to deprive any human being of his liberty. . . . While there are many who will agree that they, personally, should not kill, steal, enslave, it is only the individual with a first-rate moral nature who will have no hand in encouraging any agency—even government—in doing these things for him or others. Anyone who gets the whole point of the Golden Rule sees that there is no escape from individual responsibility by resort to the popular expedient of collective action.

How does the golden rule illustrate the dividing line between collectivists and libertarians?

> It is the difference of opinion as to what should be denied others that highlights the essential difference between the collectivists—socialists, statists, interventionists, mercantilists—and those of the libertarian faith. Take stock of what you would prohibit others from doing and you will accurately find your own position in the ideological line-up. . . .
>
> . . . The collectivist philosophy: *We*—you and I—*belong* to the state. We are *"its"* wards! . . .
>
> . . . Where . . . are the prohibitions? The program [someone] favors would cost X hundred million dollars annually. From where come these millions? The state has nothing except that which it takes from the people. Therefore, this man favors that we be prohibited from using the fruits of our own labor as we choose in order that these fruits be expended as the state chooses . . . [with] police force as the method of persuasion.
>
> . . . That portion of our incomes is socialized which the state turns to its use by its prohibition of our use. It follows, then, that a person would impose prohibitions on the rest of us to the extent that he supports governmental projects which would socialize our income.

Read then gives a small portion of the cornucopia of examples that people have accepted as justifications for prohibitions on our freedom of choice.

> There are ever so many who favor prohibiting our freedom of choice in order to:
>
> Pay farmers for not growing peanuts, tobacco, and other crops;
>
> Support socialist governments all over the world;
>
> Put men on the moon;
>
> Subsidize below-cost pricing in air, water, and land transportation, education, insurance, loans of countless kinds;
>
> Socialize security;
>
> "Renew" downtowns that consumers have deserted, build hospitals and other local facilities;
>
> Give Federal aid of this or that variety, endlessly.

. . . Another phase of socialism is the state ownership and/or control of the *means* of production. Included among the existing prohibitions of this type are:

> The planting of all of a farmer's own acreage to wheat, cotton, peanuts, corn, tobacco, rice—even to feed his own stock;
>
> The quitting of a business at will;
>
> The taking of a job at will;
>
> The selling of a citizens own product at his own price, for instance, milk, steel, and others;
>
> The free pricing of services (wages);
>
> The delivery of first-class mail for pay. . . .
>
> The listing of prohibitions is endless.

He then asks a question that has become even more important since the recent expansions in government prohibitions: "Which of all the prohibitions . . . implicit in socialism do you or others favor?"

> Those among us with a libertarian devotion would, it is true, impose certain prohibitions on others. They quite accurately note that not all individuals have acquired a moral nature sufficient strictly to observe such fundamentally sound taboos as "Thou shalt not kill" and "Thou shalt not steal." There are those who will take the lives of others, and those who will take the livelihood of others, such as those who will pilfer and those who will get the government to do their pilfering for them. Most libertarian believers would supplement the moral laws with social laws aimed at prohibiting any citizen from doing violence to another's person (life) or another's livelihood (extension of life). Thus, they would prohibit or at least penalize murder, theft, fraud, misrepresentation. In short, they would inhibit or prohibit the *destructive* actions of any and all, *and that is all*! Asserts the libertarian, "Freely choose how you act creatively, productively, for this is in the realm of what's right. I have no desire to prohibit you or others in this respect. I have no prohibitory designs on you of any kind except as you or others would keep me and others from acting creatively, productively ourselves, that is, *as we*

> *freely choose*. I do not classify any creative action as a wrong action."
>
> . . . The libertarian in his hoped-for prohibition of destructive actions does no violence to anyone else's liberty. . . . We must not, therefore, think of liberty as being restrained when fraud, violence, and the like are prohibited, for these destructive actions violate the liberty of others and, therefore, they are not in the composition of liberty. Destructive actions are the negations of liberty. . . . An accomplished libertarian would never prohibit the liberty of another.
>
> There we have it: the all-out collectivists at one end of the ideological spectrum who would completely prohibit individual liberty and, at the other end of the spectrum, the libertarians whose prohibitions are not opposed to but are in support of individual liberty. And their prohibitions are few and as simple as the two Commandments against assaults on life and livelihood.
>
> . . . The libertarian . . . observing that human frailties are universal, balks at halting the evolutionary process which is the ultimate prohibition implicit in authoritarian schemes. . . . How can the human situation improve if the rest of us are prohibited from growing beyond the level of the prohibitionist's imperfections?
>
> . . . Human faculties can flower, man can move toward his creative destiny, only if he be free to do so; in a word, where liberty prevails.
>
> What should be prohibited? *Actions which impair liberty*! Let us find these and be rid of them, for they are wrong.

Leonard Read shows the massive chasm between the few prohibitions—of what we all agree is wrong—necessary to liberty, on the one hand, and the panoply of prohibitions enforced by an imposed collectivism, on the other. Prohibitions added since Read wrote his essay have only further constrained our power to make our own decisions. Their exponential expansion under the banner of covid has multiplied the width of the chasm and therefore the importance of the issue. Not only do we need to recognize and oppose further inroads into our self-ownership but we must also apply our understanding to roll back what should never have rolled over us in the first place.

34.

To Alleviate Misfortune

"No one must profit from the misfortune of others." I hear and read such assertions virtually every time there is an emergency or disaster or whenever some good is considered essential or "necessary."

That is why, when I found that quote at the head of Leonard Read's article "To Alleviate Misfortune" (Read 1963b), from the November 1963 issue of *The Freeman*, it drew me in, just as a pull quote is designed to. Read offers a well thought-out analysis of this notion, which has been so often repeated with the presumption that no one with any empathy could harbor a different opinion. "Socialists . . . will, invariably, use bad predicament, disaster, misfortune as an argument for socialization. It is important that we not be taken in by this 'reasoning.'"

Read gives an interesting version of a slippery-slope argument about defending private-property rights and voluntary associations in markets. "*Once we concede that socialism is a valid means to alleviate distress, regardless of how serious the plight, we affirm the validity of socialism in all activities.*"

When some allegedly essential good is unusually scarce, as may occur in a crisis or emergency, then making the best use of what is available could be considered even more important than usual. Such a situation makes a strong case for market mechanisms over clumsy and inefficient government allocation or even a complete government takeover.

> When we rule out profit or the hope of gain as a proper motive to supply drugs or to alleviate illness or to provide other remedies for misfortune, we must, perforce, dismiss profit as a proper motivation for the attainment of any economic end.

Read makes his case with an example few would have thought of: power tools.

> Consider the scope of misfortune. True, illness is a misfortune as would be the nonavailability of drugs. But . . . *the absence of any good or service on which we have become dependent qualifies as misfortune*. Imagine the disappearance of all power tools. This would be . . . disastrous. . . .

> Our dependence on power tools is such that most of us would perish were they to disappear. But does the possibility of their disappearance (and the inevitable mass suffering and death that would follow it) warrant the setting up of a state owned and operated power tool industry?

He then asks an interesting question I had never considered before: Isn't almost every economic effort we put forward an attempt to stave off some sort of misfortune or difficulty in a world of unavoidable scarcity? For example, don't we routinely work so that we have the resources to avoid homelessness, alleviate hunger, and combat illness?

> Viewed in economic terms, man spends his earthly days working himself out of and insuring against this or that type of misfortune. Bad predicament is our lot except as we succeed in extricating ourselves. . . . Economics, as a discipline, concerns itself with the means of overcoming the scarcity of goods and services, and it matters not one whit what good or service is in short supply.

The principles of economics apply in times of crisis just as they do at any other time, and they should inform our consideration of situations where, "broadly speaking, two systems, now in heated contention, are advanced as the appropriate means to overcome economic misfortune."

> The first, to any casual observer, looks more like chaos than a system. Its credo is freedom in exchange: Let everyone act creatively as he wishes, inattentive to five-year plans or the like; that is, let each person pursue his own gain or profit . . . as long as he allows the same freedom to others. Government, the social agency of compulsion, has no say-so whatsoever in creative actions; it is limited to framing and enforcing the taboos against fraud, violence, predation, and other destructive actions. This philosophy permits no man to ride herd over men. Would-be dictators, mind your own business! The right to the fruits of one's own labor is of its essence, individual freedom of choice its privilege, open opportunity for everyone its promise, the hope of personal achievement—gain or profit—its motivator. Call this the market economy.
>
> The second is definitely a system: an organized, political hierarchy planning everything for everyone. The hierarchy

> prescribes what people shall produce, what goods and services they may exchange and with whom and on what terms. . . . It is arbitrary people-control by the few who succeed in gaining political authority. . . . Freedom of choice, private ownership, and profit are among its taboos. Briefly, it is the state ownership and control of the means as well as the results of production. Call this socialism.

The market economy is based on defending property rights and freedom of association, preventing the expropriation of some for the gain of others. But socializing choices is often a mechanism for enacting such expropriation.

> No question about it, the results of production can be and are successfully socialized, that is, they can be and are effectively expropriated. Further, they can be and are redistributed according to the whims of the hierarchy and/or political pressures. But socialism, like Robin Hoodism, demands and presupposes a wealth situation which socialism itself is utterly incapable of creating. It can redistribute the golden eggs but it cannot lay them. And it kills the goose!

Read then turns to the Pilgrims for a particularly clear and painful illustration. The common property systems originally in use in both Plymouth and Jamestown produced terrible results. Of Jamestown's initial 104 colonists, sixty-six died within six months, most from famine. Only sixty of five hundred arrivals two years later survived that long. The consequences of this "starving time" included cannibalism. Plymouth's first colonists did not fare much better: only about half survived six months, and some, in desperation, sold their clothes and blankets to the natives or became their servants.

> Refer to the early Pilgrim experience. . . . All produce was coerced into a common warehouse and distributed according 'to need.' But the warehouse was always running out of provender; the Pilgrims were starving and dying. They did, in fact, socialize the *results* of production but, by so doing, they weakened the *means* and, thus, had little in the way of *results* to distribute.

Read then addresses the misconception that profits increase costs, when in reality they arise from decreases in costs to the consumer. This belief prevents people from seeing how markets (i.e., the mechanisms they

adopt voluntarily when given the choice) serve them better than centralized allocation.

> Those who have few if any insights into the miracle of the market are led into the false notion that the communalization or communization or socialization of an activity reduces costs because no profit is allowed. The fact is to the contrary. . . .
>
> A distinguishing feature of the market economy is the profit and loss system. But, contrary to what casual scrutiny reveals, profits are not added into price; they are, in effect, taken out of cost. The profit and loss system is an impersonal, couldn't-care-less, signaling system: the hope of profits entices would-be enterprisers into a given activity and losses ruthlessly weed out inefficient, high-cost producers.

With his analysis of the claim that "no one must profit from the misfortune of others" being very different from what we so often hear, it is no surprise that Read comes to a different conclusion as well.

> When [threatened by] misfortune, we should not attempt revival by a resort to socialism, for it can perform no more than a malfunction. . . . [Instead], remove the fetters! Free the market . . . let the hope of profit attract all aspiring producers and let the stern, uncompromising, impersonal lash of losses weed out the inefficient, leaving only the most efficient in charge of overcoming our bad predicaments.
>
> . . . Looking solely at the enormous record, the individuals sorted out by the market are more efficient (lower-cost) managers of human and natural resources than are political appointees. If we remove the hope of profit as a means to alleviate misfortune—poverty, illness, misery, disaster—we shall increase our misfortunes.

35.

The Free Market Ignores the Poor

For years, I have toyed with writing an article I would title "Ignore the Rich." The core idea would be that focusing on "the rich" leads to envy and, from there, all sorts of restrictions that hinder the incentives for people, rich and poor, to use their productive assets in the service of others. Ignoring the rich and instead focusing on effects produced for everyone could help bring about far better policies and far broader benefits for society.

Leonard Read follows a similar path in "The Free Market Ignores the Poor" (Read 2014b), first published in his 1962 book *Clichés of Socialism*. Today, almost every policy—say, the imposition of higher electricity bills or mortgage loan rates on those with higher incomes or better credit scores—is "justified," at least in part, by its helping the poor through some form of government coercion. But ignoring the poor as well as the rich, beyond giving them the same justice and protection, would also benefit society.

> Once an activity has been socialized for a spell, nearly everyone will concede that that's the way it should be.
>
> Without socialized education, how would the poor get their schooling? Without the socialized post office, how would farmers receive their mail except at great expense? Without Social Security, the aged would end their years in poverty! . . .
>
> Agreement with the idea of state absolutism follows socialization, appallingly. Why? . . .
>
> Once an activity has been socialized, it is impossible to point out, by concrete example, how men in a free market could better conduct it. How, for instance, can one compare a socialized post office with private postal delivery when the latter has been outlawed? It's something like trying to explain to a people accustomed only to darkness how things would appear were there light. One can only resort to imaginative construction.

Read gives one of his favorite examples of such a socialized activity—the US Postal Service.

> During recent years, men and women in free and willing exchange (the free market) have discovered how to deliver the human voice around the earth in one twenty-seventh of a second; how to deliver an event, like a ball game, into everyone's living room, in color and in motion, at the time it is going on; how to deliver 115 people from Los Angeles to Baltimore in three hours and 19 minutes; how to deliver gas from a hole in Texas to a range in New York at low cost and without subsidy. . . . Yet, such commonplace free market phenomena as these . . . fail to convince most people that "the post" could be left to free market delivery without causing people to suffer.

He then develops an imaginative extension to reinforce this illustration.

> Imagine that our federal government, at its very inception, had issued an edict to the effect that all boys and girls, from birth to adulthood, were to receive shoes and socks from the federal government "for free." Next, imagine that this practice of "free shoes and socks" had been going on [since America's founding]. Lastly, imagine . . . one with a faith in the wonders of what can be wrought when people are free—saying, "I do not believe that shoes and socks for kids should be a government responsibility. Properly, that is a responsibility of the family. This activity should never have been socialized. It is appropriately a free market activity."
>
> What, under these circumstances, would be the response to such a stated belief? Based on what we hear on every hand, once an activity has been socialized for even a short time, the common chant would go like this, "Ah, but you would let the poor children go unshod!"
>
> However . . . where the activity has not yet been socialized, we are able to point out that the poor children are better shod in countries where shoes and socks are a family responsibility than in countries where they are a government responsibility. We're able to demonstrate that the poor children are better shod in countries that are more free than in countries that are less free.

Read then explains what he means by his claim that the free market ignores the poor and why in doing so it improves our experience.

> The free market ignores the poor precisely as it does not recognize the wealthy—it is "no respecter of persons." It is an organizational way of doing things featuring openness, which enables millions of people to cooperate and compete without demanding a preliminary clearance of pedigree, nationality, color, race, religion, or wealth. It demands only that each person abide by voluntary principles, that is, by fair play. The free market means willing exchange; it is impersonal justice in the economic sphere and excludes coercion, plunder, theft, protectionism, subsidies, special favors from those wielding power, and other anti-free market methods by which goods and services change hands. It opens the way for mortals to act morally because they are free to act morally.

Today, Read's analysis would be met with the rebuttal that markets fail us when people do bad things, followed by some version of the current reigning non sequitur that government must intervene in those cases and fix things. Unfortunately, that counterclaim ignores Thomas Sowell's often repeated insight that in a world of unavoidable scarcity, public policies can offer "no solutions, only tradeoffs," which means government, which has no resources but what it has taken from people, must violate citizens' property rights to provide its alleged "solutions."

Further, to portray government as a paternalistic solution ignores not just the theft involved and the undermining of productive incentives but also the fact that it has insufficient information and incentives with which to make decisions. Government dictators care less about citizens than people do about themselves and parents do about their children. They also know less about the preferences and abilities of people and the tradeoffs they are willing to make. Moreover, government benefits by making citizens dependent rather than independent.

Read's rebuttal to the argument about human imperfection is:

> Admittedly, human nature is defective, and its imperfections will be reflected in the market (though arguably, no more so than in government). But the free market opens the way for men to operate at their moral best, and all observation confirms that the poor fare better under these circumstances than when the way is closed, as it is under socialism.

36.

Coping with Poverty

Exit polls revealed an interesting aspect of the 2012 presidential election. Mitt Romney was preferred by substantial margins among those who most wanted someone who "shares my values," "is a strong leader," or "has a vision for the future." He was not preferred, however, by 81 percent of people who wanted someone who "cares about people like me."

That last category determined the election and reflected the thrust of President Obama's campaign, which demonized Governor Romney and his supporters as caring only about themselves and the rich and unfairly burdening others. But it also revealed an electoral weakness for anyone who advocates for smaller government: demagogues can easily portray support for such a position as a selfish threat to government benefits that depend on others being forced to pay for them. This makes any rollback in "coercive charity" almost politically impossible. Yet, ironically, the result of such successful demagoguery is to harm those it supposedly helps, because more freedom offers the best hope for those struggling economically.

While the use of this political tactic has increased recently, it was established long ago. In fact, one of the most insightful analyses is nearly as old as the War on Poverty—namely, Leonard Read's "Coping with Poverty," from his 1968 book *Accent on the Right* (Read 1968), which emphasizes the frequent failure of those who favor liberty and makes clear that liberty is the source of the greatest possible benefits to the poor and other market participants.

> Millions of Americans . . . [labor] under the misapprehension that the philosophy of individual liberty is little more than an intellectual apology for entrenched wealth, a rationale for persons who have no concern for those below their own dollar stations. . . .
>
> . . . So firmly embedded in [the minds of those who stand for liberty] is the fact that liberty is the poor man's best ally that we mistakenly assume a like awareness on the part of everyone else. Failing to identify the free market and related institutions with kindly sentiments and noble objectives—such as a better life for the poor—we fumble

the ball, so to speak, allowing the opposition to run with it—and play to the grandstand!

The era of free and willing exchange extends, roughly, over [America's history]. In no other period of history have so many raised themselves out of poverty. Why, then, are those of us who champion free and willing exchange—the only antipoverty device in man's possession—so seldom credited with relieving the poor man of his burden? Quite frankly, it is because such relief is not the major end we have in view. *Freedom and wide open opportunity for all is the prime objective*. But—and this is the point—the fastest possible elimination of poverty is one of the inescapable byproducts of this liberty. . . . And this effect cannot be achieved in any other way.

Unfortunately, when we keep an eye on freedom as our prime objective, we tend to omit any mention of relief from poverty as its by-product . . . a serious oversight. . . . The authoritarians grapple on to it and assume the role of the poor man's champion, all because we have failed to identify the politically attractive by-product of freedom with freedom itself.

Little attention need be given here to the empty promises of political authoritarians. It is as much of a delusion to expect that government can end poverty as to expect that the local policeman can make us rich. Government has nothing at all on hand to dispense except what it has garnisheed from taxpayers—what it forcibly subtracts from private ownership. This, obviously, is a dead-end road: savings are drained from those who have, and consumed by those who have not—the opposite of capital formation on which productivity rests and on which relief from poverty depends. It is all political give-away—redistribution—with absolutely nothing formative, productive, or creative about it. . . .

But regardless of how faulty their theories, the political authoritarians proclaim themselves the champions of the poor. They have fastened onto the poverty banner, and placed themselves in the vanguard of "the down-trodden." They have gained a considerable following because many people wish to believe in these easy promises and the

> champions of freedom, failing to make their own case, have unwittingly tossed the baton to the authoritarians.
>
> . . . The popular view [is] that free market practices generally favor those of affluence and generally neglect the interests of the poor. But this notion . . . is wholly superficial, and false.
>
> When champions of the free market recognize and correct this erroneous concept, they will have found the key to explain how freedom best serves the interests of all—especially the poor. Not until that is done may the poor be expected to look to liberty for their material well-being.
>
> Here is the overlooked fact: The unprecedented practice of freedom in our country has, one might say, catapulted many millions of "the masses"—including you and me—into a state of affluence previously unknown to history. . . .
>
> The reason that the free market, private ownership, limited government philosophy is popularly regarded as an apology for affluence rather than as a boon for the poor is that its practice has made possible such affluence. If we note only the accomplishment, as if it were automatically due us, we lose all sight of its genesis: liberty!
>
> The alleviation of poverty is a by-product—a lifesaving benefit—along man's way toward the higher ideal of liberty. The benefit springs from no other source than liberty. . . .
>
> . . . Restore and preserve the practice of free market, private ownership, limited government principles; and one of the by-products will be as much removal of poverty as possible.
>
> Doubtless, we have been negligent about accenting this important dividend of liberty: *it* is *a boon to the poor*. However, if we set the alleviation of poverty as our highest goal we shall, by thus lowering our sights, not only spread poverty but lose our freedom.

Leonard Read recognizes that economic liberty gives all members of society the best possible incentives to indirectly benefit themselves by developing and applying whatever resources and skills they possess—great or

small—to benefit others. In short, the pursuit of liberty is the most effective means of helping the poor economically because it is the most effective means of helping everyone economically. But his primary concern is with how redistribution enforced by government undermines the growth of its recipients. The most effective means of achieving that growth is the pursuit of freedom.

37.

Resisting the Temptation of Problems beyond Our Powers

What kinds of social problems and issues do individuals become aware of, and what kinds can they fix? If the answer to the second question is not the same as the answer to the first, which is increasingly true in a world with exponentially increasing access to information, then even well-intended "solutions" can fail or cause harm rather than provide help. It is crucial that people realize that there are far fewer items on the second list than on the first.

That is an important issue that Leonard Read insightfully addresses in "Rising above Mediocrity," from his 1969 book *The Coming Aristocracy* (Read 1969a). With social "solutions" being increasingly offered for every perceived or imaginary problem, Read's insights have become even more important to remember today.

> My grandfather knew what went on under his nose—and little else. The wrongs and woes he observed were only those in his little orbit and these were few and minor. . . . Their world . . . was microcosmic and, as such, was not beyond their powers to manage. . . .
>
> Our mental abilities are not to be distinguished from theirs, but the wrongs and woes coming within our vision are without limit. . . .
>
> No less in our case than in grandfather's, we react to wrongs and woes—nearby or far off—with, "I must do something!" For our compassion . . . remains on a level with that of our recent ancestors, as does our limited capabilities to right the wrongs and relieve the woes. . . .
>
> Grandfather, however, reacting to the little he perceived, could and did rely upon his own efforts governed by his moral scruples. . . . But we? No such solution is open to us for these far-out problems. . . . Their handling is beyond our personal capacity. . . . My compassion bumps head-on into my limited ability. What, pray tell, can I do?

A prepackaged answer is waiting for me. Swarms of social reformers in government not only express a willingness to cope with these countless wrongs and woes, they actually plead with me to let them shoulder the burdens of my distressed brothers. And unless I am aware of the dreadful consequences, I will salve my conscience by giving them the go-ahead. . . .

. . . The price we are compelled to pay, once we resort to the reformer's legerdemain, will be more than we can bear. . . .

. . . Mediocrity will be institutionalized. What we should recognize about the social reformers is that their mentalities and capabilities are not above our own. Indeed, the fact that they aren't even aware of their limitations suggests that they be graded below the rest of us. Nevertheless, there they are with these far-out problems on their hands, no one of them knowing any more about how to solve them than do you or I.

So, what is the social reformer's typical move? Almost without exception, he appoints a committee! And this gives him the same satisfaction of having accomplished something as we felt originally in turning the wrongs and woes of mankind over to him. We salved our consciences by nothing more than a gesture, and the social reformers, by another gesture, salve theirs. . . . Yet, we and they together have only built monuments to our ignorance, that is, institutionalized our collective mediocrity. The error is compounded by our apparent satisfaction at thus having solved everything so easily.

. . . We, after turning the wrongs and woes over to social reformers, retire from the field. So far as we are concerned, that's that! And then observe that the social reformers, after appointing a committee, also retire from the field. So far as they are concerned, that's that! . . .

. . . Salving our consciences in this easy and wholly irresponsible manner blinds us to reality; we have no eye for such solutions as lie within our power. When we pursue the impossible, we lose all sight of the possible.

. . . How, then, are the wrongs and woes of mankind to be solved? . . .

The first step is to recognize that not all of the wrongs and woes of mankind are my problems. Nor yours! For anyone—social reformer or whoever—to assume otherwise is to claim a self-divinity: the welfare of humanity is my responsibility! Let's be realistic about this. . . . My problems are those potentially within my reach, the ones I can solve by personal practice—and no others.

While I cannot help bemoaning the far-out wrongs and woes of mankind with which I am daily confronted, I must, to be sensible, . . . labor in my own vineyard, not someone else's. Grandfather wasn't aware of all these problems; I am. But such awareness hasn't upgraded my competence to cope with such problems; it has only tempted me to do so, a temptation to which I must never yield. *Attending well to my problem, you to yours, and others to theirs, prescribes the formula for solving the world's wrongs and woes.*

. . . Bear in mind the amazing extent to which most of the wrongs and woes will right themselves if not disturbed by outside intervention. . . . When I try to set others straight, correcting what I believe to be their errant ways, they rise to their own defense, rationalize what they have been doing and, thus, come to believe their wrongs are right. My intervention provides the tension that upholds their ways and, finally, hardens them in their sins.

When we confine ourselves to our own upgrading and try to solve problems that are within our scope and orbit . . . by this light may wrongdoers see their errors. To confront and accuse another of wrongdoing is to overshadow him, cut off any light he might otherwise have received. This only delays or precludes the corrective action that the wrongdoer himself must undertake when he comes to see the self-destructive nature of his evil ways.

When each of us focuses on far-out problems—those we cannot handle—the wrongs and woes of society multiply; instead of solving problems, we institutionalize mediocrity. But when each of us tackles the problems that are within his capabilities, problem solving occurs efficiently in our respective areas of responsibility. In this manner we rise above our mediocrity and pave the way not only to our own but to society's excellence.

Leonard Read recognizes that there is a risk whenever compassion urges us to "do something" about a problem that is beyond our ability to solve. The attempt is destined to fail, "institutionalizing mediocrity" and displacing those individuals whose circumstances and knowledge do put them in positions to work voluntarily toward solutions. (And here, we must remember that not all problems can be solved, in large part because there is no solution to scarcity, which underlies so many of the problems which face us. Success in dealing with such problems can only reduce, not eliminate, scarcity's unavoidable burdens.) Furthermore, our attempts to fix others and their problems divert thought and energy from those problems of our own that we do have the power to address.

For decades, government has been moving in a direction nearly opposite to what Read prescribes. Its direction has resulted in little success but a great deal of damage to individuals and to their faith in cooperation—the faith that once made American success a wonder of the world. That is why it is so important that we see the wisdom in the idea that "when we pursue the impossible [through government coercion], we lose all sight of the possible [through voluntary individual action]."

38.

The Macro Malady

As someone who teaches public finance (or, more accurately, the economics of government), I can't count how many times I have heard politicians promise "comprehensive" reforms that will address some major problem. What the efforts actually produce is always different from what was promised, such achievements being beyond the competence of government. The more comprehensive the "reforms" (say, measured by the number of pages of a bill), the greater the number of adverse incentives that undermine social cooperation are created and the less freedom remains. Of course, when the political goal is the "unity" of 51 percent to reallocate the minority's rights and resources, that reality makes a great deal of sense.

Leonard Read confronts this problem in "The Macro Malady," from his 1967 book *Deeper than You Think* (Read 1967), in terms of individual "micros," who deal with the microscale problems that they have sufficient knowledge and power to alter for the better, and government actors, who are not only less competent at solving micro problems than the individuals directly involved in them but also less competent when trying to achieve comprehensive, systemic solutions to macro problems than they claim to be.

> Most people have been "micros" . . . [who] wrestle with social problems of the micro sort. . . .
>
> But . . . millions upon millions of people are now presuming to settle problems that are over their heads—macro problems. This accounts, in no small measure, for our headlong return to coercive collectivism . . . each trying to focus on a problem that is beyond his competence.
>
> What has brought on this rash of macro addicts? Nearly everyone trying to solve problems bigger than the would-be problem solvers . . . and, as a consequence, push us into the coercive collectivism of the all-powerful state.

What happens when we put the government in charge of producing macro solutions?

> What to do? . . . Having only micro mentalities ourselves, we don't quite know how to solve a macro problem. So, how are micro mentalities to be made into macro-problem solvers? . . .

> . . . Thoughtlessly . . . we turn the macro problems over to government. But, by this process, what is it we really do? We do no more than give the macro problems to micro mentalities with but one ingredient added: a police force! Reduced to its essence, we give micro thinkers the gun power of a constabulary on the naïve assumption that this renders a competency to cope with macro problems. We add only force—not one iota of wisdom. . . .
>
> . . . What can I do with a gun that I can't do better without one? Nothing whatsoever! . . .
>
> No plague has ever destroyed or impoverished or kept from self-realization more human beings than has the macro malady.

In contrast, individual "micros" are more capable of addressing micro problems via voluntary arrangements. These ultimately improve the world in general, reflecting Read's long-held belief that the way to improve the world is to improve ourselves because doing so benefits both us and others.

> Men in a free market, a people who limit themselves to micro problems—acting individually and in response to free choice—do not make war; they create and trade! . . . Any people, . . . when free of busybodies, tend to mind their own business.

Frequently promised aggregate or macro solutions, in contrast, run afoul of Thomas Sowell's recognition that in a world of scarcity, when it comes to policy, "there are no solutions, only tradeoffs." Ignoring essential parts of such tradeoffs—as do government functionaries who know less about our circumstances, preferences, and abilities than we do, and who care about us less than we do—is a very poor way to achieve macro goals. Yet the attempt to do what cannot be adequately done can cause a great deal of damage when backed by government's power to coerce people.

> What, then, is the remedy for the macro malady? . . .
>
> . . . The first step, it seems, is to recognize that "I"—no matter who—am a micro mentality and, thus, incapable of coping with or solving macro problems. . . . I must learn to tell the truth: "I don't know."
>
> The next step is to realize that no other person, regardless of pretensions or the amount of force at his disposal,

> possesses anything beyond micro mentality himself and is no more capable of solving macro problems than I am. Required is a penetrating skepticism: trust no man beyond his infinitesimal area of competence; hold him to the very little he knows.
>
> When enough of this kind of realistic skepticism exists, we will have no more truck with "pretenders to the throne" . . . [and will instead experience] the therapeutic power of freedom. True, "millions of private economic decisions made independently of each other," may not bring us out where he wants us to be; but this micro, free market, individual, freedom-of-choice process will bring millions of people as close to where each of them wants to be as is possible.

Our increasingly complex arrangements require us, as individual micros, to address the problems we are competent for and to leave fewer problems to incompetent political determination, which actually undermines our capabilities.

> The more complex the economy the more must the micro way of life be relied upon. For, as the complexity of the economy increases, man's ability to manage it correspondingly diminishes. No self-respecting individual will concede to any other person the competency to manage his own creative life for him. Think, then, how absurd it is to expect a competency to direct the complex arrangement involving millions of lives!

Managing our own creative lives, coordinated with voluntary resolutions, leads us back toward liberty, or self-ownership, rather than away from it, the direction that has increasingly characterized our lives.

> The micro approach—each person operating within the limits of his knowledge and competence—should require no theorizers; its record is so remarkable and profuse, . . . each person trying to figure out how best to improve his own little world in free and voluntary cooperation with others. Problems will fit the problem solvers and, thus, find such resolution as each is capable of. When individuals attempt to solve problems over their heads, they are in a wild and dangerous guessing game. . . . But when individuals are at work on problems of their own size, they will be at their best as problem solvers.

39.

Exalting the Common Good

Americans hear a lot about "common good" capitalism these days. But, as with most political adjectives and modifiers, the term is misleading and, as a result, a false premise on which to build one's understanding.

As Donald Boudreaux has recently written, "If all that 'common good capitalism' means is capitalism as understood and championed over the past 250 years by liberal scholars . . . this new name serves no good purpose. . . . It suggests that (what I'll call) 'true capitalism' . . . doesn't promote the common good. . . . Yet . . . advocates of true capitalism (including me), do indeed believe that true capitalism promotes the common good. And to back our case, we've got lots of sound theory and solid evidence" (Boudreaux 2023).

For decades, Leonard Read has been one of the strongest voices for the idea that Don Boudreaux expresses here, especially in "Exalting the Common Good," from his 1982 book *The Path of Duty* (Read 1982), the last he published.

Read starts with a quote—inspirational for anyone who believes in freedom—from George Sutherland, Associate Justice of the US Supreme Court from 1922 to 1938: "To sustain the individual freedom of action contemplated by the Constitution is not to strike down the common good, but to exalt it; for surely the good of society as a whole cannot be better served than by the preservation against arbitrary restraint of the liberties of its constituent members."

Unfortunately, Justice Sutherland's wisdom is a far cry from what most people today, or at the time Read wrote this essay, seem to believe.

> Most citizens in today's U.S.A. haven't the slightest understanding of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.
>
> Sutherland, on the other hand, understood these writings as well as did the authors of these politico-economic, spiritual documents: the greatest in all history! The basic premise that separates the American experiment in Man-Government relationships from all others is contained in the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

How much did those who signed that document believe in the freedoms it enshrined? What were they willing to put on the line?

> Reflect on the fact that these signers were, for the most part, men of means . . . signing their own death warrant, so contrary to popular opinion were their glorious intentions!
>
> . . . They were willing to trade their well-being to bring about, at best, the birth of a nation with unprecedented freedom principles; or a dangerous hangman's rope, at worse!
>
> Almost to a man, they paid a heavy price! . . . Few survived to live out natural lives. They pledged—and they paid—and in doing so they gave birth to your and my freedom. Would you have signed the Declaration? Your answer is affirmative—provided that you are trying, regardless of opposition and unpopularity, to regain the liberty our Founding Fathers bequeathed to us Americans. Hail to their wisdom, courage and exemplarity.

But what has that got to do with "common good" capitalism?

> Justice Sutherland insisted that we should exalt the common good, his reference being the *good* set forth in our Constitution. . . .
>
> Why do so few approve, accept and abide by the freedom way of life? . . . The truth as I now see it? *No one can or ever will be able to explain the miracle of freedom*. Were clear, lucid and persuasive explanation a requirement, some one or more of us would need to understand and explain every facet of human action—creativity at the human level. No individual is or ever has been graced with such wisdom. Nor is such omniscience necessary for a belief in freedom. . . .
>
> Many individuals have looked upon freedom, not as a miracle, but as an explainable way of life. Being unable to

> explain it themselves and knowing of no one who can, they hold it in far less esteem than socialism which they find easier to explain.
>
> All but a few are blind to freedom's miracles . . . [because] the more one knows the more awareness of how little he knows . . . is the beginning of such wisdom as is within mortal man's domain.
>
> There are reasons galore as to why freedom is not believed to be a miracle. Here is one: Our everyday life is crowded with miracles, so many that they have become commonplace . . . [and] taken for granted.

Does the inability of anyone to recognize and explain in its entirety the miracle of freedom—that is, the miracle of the private-property and voluntary relationships of "ordinary" capitalism, not common good capitalism, crony capitalism, or dog-eat-dog capitalism—mean that freedom (clearly in retreat in many ways) is beyond recovery?

> Is it practical to believe in the unexplainable miracle, freedom? The answer is an unequivocal "*Yes*." Why? Because the individual's freedom to act creatively as he pleases is materially, morally and spiritually sound.
>
> At our down-to-earth level, more miracles than anyone can count result from freedom, the greatest demonstration in all history being the American miracle.
>
> When our tiny bits of expertise are free to flow, they configurate . . . [and] make the miracle.
>
> Here are some final thoughts gleaned from that brilliant Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–59). . . .
>
> > Some nations have freedom in the blood and are ready to face the greatest perils and hardships in its defense. . . . Other nations, once they have grown prosperous, lose interest in freedom and let it be snatched away from them without lifting a hand to defend it, lest they should endanger thus the comforts that, in fact, they owe to it alone. It is easy to see that what is lacking in such nations is a genuine love of freedom, that lofty aspiration which, I confess, *defies analysis. For it is something one must feel.* . . .

Let us then believe that the miracle of freedom will rise again!

40.

Leave It to the Free Market

Once upon a time, before government had so thoroughly commandeered and domineered voluntary arrangements, whether of exchange or charity, an acceptable answer to "Well, what would you do?" about some social issue might have been, "Leave it to the free market." It would have been understood as something like, "Let people cooperate however they choose, as long as they respect others' rights," and would have no negative connotation.

But that time is long gone. Decades of demeaning misrepresentations of market mechanisms, combined with many voluntary arrangements crowded out by government, have turned a widely respected answer into one that elicits suspicion.

One of Leonard Read's lifelong projects was to portray the beneficial (indeed, irreplaceable) reality of such arrangements and the harm resulting from government's ham-handed interference. He addresses this issue many times but perhaps does it best in "Leave It to the Free Market!," from his 1971 book *Then Truth Will Out* (Read 1971a).

> When things go askew in the economy planners in and out of government "rush to the rescue" with countless panaceas. Those of us who question their schemes are confronted with the challenge, "Well, what would you do?" And our reply, "Leave it to the free market," is shouted down as being impersonal, heartless, inconsiderate, cold, and not quite humane. . . .
>
> . . . The market, if free, is intimately personal; it renders justice in the only sensible definition of that term; it continuously and automatically moves ever-changing satisfactions and ever-changing aspirations-supply and demand of particular goods and services-toward a harmony one with the other; it is humane to the extent of the human kindness that is within us.
>
> The alternative to the free market is the rigged, planned, dictatorial, coercive, interventionist, authoritarian market, variously known as the planned economy, the welfare state, omnipotent government. . . . As contrasted with the free

market, this is definitely disruptive and antisocial; it is, by its nature, incapable of rendering justice; it is forever and of necessity forcing ever-changing satisfactions and ever-changing aspirations toward a state of disharmony one with the other—shortages of this, surpluses of that, and so on; it stifles and eventually kills human kindness. . . .

The free market is intimately personal. . . . [In it are] persons deciding each for himself what to produce, where to work, what to buy and sell, and what are to be acceptable terms of exchange. I, who know more about me than anyone else, in charge of me! How possibly can a way of life be more intimately personal than each individual his own decision-maker!

In the alternative situation, a bureaucrat presides over these decisions. . . . He cannot know, can only guess, what may be your countless and ever-changing preferences or what constitutes your idea of your welfare. Someone who knows nothing of you and me in charge of you and me. Dictatorial to the core!

The free market renders justice. Justice . . . relates to relationships one with another and is achieved when our relations with each other are fair. How is a just exchange to be determined? It is simply a matter of respecting subjective judgments. If you prefer what I have to offer more than what you stand ready to give in exchange, that is all there is to it: economic justice. This is willing exchange—both parties willing—a prime tenet of the free market way of life.

. . . A bureaucrat . . . to the extent he intervenes in our relationships, to that extent are exchanges unwilling, that is, not in accord with your own preferences. If it be conceded that you and I have as much right to life, livelihood, liberty as anyone else, then all exchanges forced upon us are, by definition, unjust. . . .

The natural tendency of the free market is to point supply and demand toward a balance. Implicit in the free market is free pricing. A rise in the price of a good or service discourages demand and encourages supply; the opposite effect is produced when price falls. . . . Hence, supply and demand are always tending toward a balance. . . .

The alternative is political rigging: wage, price, rent, interest, exchange, and production controls. . . .

. . . It is only political interference with the market that makes us think in terms of "shortage" and "surplus." . . .

. . . This least efficacious way of economic life presupposes a knowledge on the part of bureaucrats that does not exist, even remotely. No one of them knows any more of the infinite data implicit in the market complex than you or I. The very fact that they think of themselves as possessing such knowledge ought, in itself, to disqualify them.

People in a free market are humane to the extent of the human kindness that is within them. The most successful war on poverty ever fought has taken place during the past two centuries when the free market has been most nearly approximated. This has revealed an incontestable fact: the most helpful service we can render our fellowmen is assiduously to attend to our own knitting—not theirs! Yet, withal, there remain some persons in distress inviting that the Judeo Christian principle of charity be practiced. . . . Whatever this spiritual content—bountiful or niggardly—it is the fact given; there is no more or less; and it will achieve its total outpouring among men when free, which is to say, among men when self-responsible—free and self-responsible being one and the same. There is no way for you or me to manifest more compassion than is within us. We manifest all there is when unhampered.

The alternative is a resort to coercive devices—the welfare state. . . . If there be compassion in their hearts, how do they propose to exercise it? With the fruits of their own labor, as the practice of Judeo-Christian charity suggests? Indeed, not! They insist that you and I, the taxpayers, do their good for them. . . .

. . . Human kindness is stifled and eventually killed by this process. . . . It is not an act of kindness for me to forcibly take from you and then give to the object of my concern. Robbing Peter to pay Paul is unkind to Peter and, certainly, there is nothing kindly in the act of bestowing such loot on Paul.

. . . This process destroys kindness in the whole population. When government assumes the responsibility for

the welfare of your neighbor, your sense of responsibility toward him vanishes. . . .

. . . When government takes from you and me, for whatever purpose, it takes the funds we might otherwise have used to relieve the distress that comes within our purview. We cannot give that which we do not possess.

Doubtless, the greatest mischief of all is the false impression of humanity this process induces. Kindliness stifled and killed—less and less of it practiced or seen. And unthinking people, viewing each other in this stultified condition, conclude that this is their natural state: charitable good-for-nothings! How far from the truth! Judging the behavior of slaves to be the way men would act in freedom is no more intelligent than expecting the dead to act alive. . . .

Unquestionably, the millions are unable to see the free market's accomplishments and potentialities. So remarkable have been its wonders, even when freedom has only been approximated, that most people in their credulity have credited the wonders to everything except the free market. . . . The free market stands mutely responsible for all the progress we have enjoyed. . . .

. . . The free market [is] that institutional or societal arrangement in which there are no man-concocted restraints against the release of creative energy. It is the maximum release of creative energy that assures maximum moral, spiritual, intellectual, economic progress. . . .

I share Bastiat's faith: "All men's impulses, when motivated by legitimate self-interest, fall into a harmonious social pattern." It is only in a free market relationship that harmony and balance can exist; it is the introduction of coercion—the overseeing force—into our relationships that sets up antagonisms, that pits us against each other, that creates imbalance, that brings on the social conflicts.

Reduce the social equation to you and me and one other that it may be clearly viewed. I do whatever I choose so long as it is peaceful; the same for you. We exchange when it is mutually advantageous to do so. The third party's delegated role is to do absolutely nothing unless one of us infracts a right of the other. Or, if there be a dispute,

> he invokes the rules of the game. This is the free market in miniature. A greater harmony is unimaginable.
>
> Now let the third party force his goals upon you and me or take from you and give to me. All three of us will become antagonists. Social chaos! And the same applies if we multiply the three of us by millions.

Today, there is widespread but undeserved denigration of voluntary arrangements and their power to advance participants' ends without harming anyone by violating their rights. Equally widespread and undeserved is the credit given to government interventions that actually hinder markets from working wonders achievable in no other way.

Leonard Read argues persuasively that such misunderstanding turns reality on its head. Voluntary arrangements (for which "market mechanisms" are just a convenient shorthand), harmony in compromise, and justice (not violating the rights of anyone) lead to social coordination, even in times of perpetual changes. Such coordination is intensely personal, reflecting each participant's circumstances and preferences. It enables all the charity that is in us, which is in turn strengthened by practice. In contrast, government intervention breaks down social coordination, produces social conflict and injustice, and "stifles and eventually kills human kindness."

Leonard Read sees through the topsy-turvy way blame is assigned to voluntary arrangements—the free market—and credit to coercive interference in those arrangements. We should heed his valuable conclusion:

> I shall always try to expose the flaws of all panaceas by the social planners, and my response to their 'Well, what would you do?' will continue to be, '*Leave it to the free market*!'

41.

Leaving behind the Labor Theory of Value

The labor theory of value, as a rationale for various incarnations of socialism, has for a long time undermined the miracles of markets and prevented people from understanding them. Leonard Read understands why it is of immense value to undo that misunderstanding, for those who believe it as well as for those who use it as an excuse for what they want government to impose on unwilling citizens. In his December 1956 *Freeman* article, "Unearned Riches" (Read 1956b), he offers a very insightful look at the issues.

> Understanding the fallacy of the labor theory of value is a first step toward respect for privately owned and controlled property, without which there can be neither voluntary exchange nor freedom.
>
> Many people sincerely believe that the value of anything is determined by the labor used in producing it. . . . Day-to-day experiences reveal its error. . . . The same labor could be used to make mud pies as to make mince pies, yet the value in the marketplace would differ. A service or a product of little value at one time or in one place may be highly valued at another time and place. . . .
>
> Individuals have varying value judgments. Value in the market sense, therefore, is a subjective rather than an objective determination. . . . Value, as beauty, cannot be objectively determined.

Why did the labor theory of value prevent people from understanding market economies?

> . . . Until the latter part of the nineteenth century . . . economists . . . were stymied in their development of economic theory because they accepted the cost-of-production or labor theory of value. They simply could not explain what they otherwise knew to be the great advantages of the free market process of voluntary exchange. They knew full

> well that both parties must gain when each traded what he wanted less for what he wanted more, yet they could not show that such gain had been "earned," for they were unable to explain it in terms of labor costs. . . .
>
> Marx, as distinguished from Adam Smith, followed the labor theory of value to its logical conclusion: socialism. . . . To allow any . . . return on capital . . . would be exploitation. . . .
>
> Only if one understands the marginal utility or subjective theory of value based upon the judgments of countless individuals acting freely and voluntarily in the market may he proceed logically to a belief in private ownership and control of property. With this kind of an understanding, he can see why any person may have a perfect right to consume more than he could ever hope to produce by his own labor. He can . . . properly own anything others will freely offer in exchange for what he has to offer them. This means gains for all participants in the exchange process, gains which must always appear to be unearned in terms of labor expended. Nonetheless, it reflects the approval of all who are properly concerned in any transaction. . . . Because it is based on willing exchange, it works without coercing anyone. The labor theory of value—the labor theory of price determination—on the other hand, founded on unwilling exchange, cannot function without coercion.

Read also sees through the attacks on capitalists and "the rich," which were justified by an appeal to the labor theory of value. He recognizes that efforts to expropriate capitalists were not only unjustified and misunderstood but harmful to the workers whom socialists claimed to want to benefit.

> If the wage earner were to succeed in cutting off what he might think are the unearned riches of his "lucky" brothers, he would at the same time destroy his own source of livelihood. . . .
>
> The opportunities that are constantly presented to him . . . are done by a vast work and exchange process . . . more complicated than any one person can understand, let alone control. . . . And he obtains all of this in exchange for his own meager efforts.

> The astounding thing is that it is possible for him to gain without any change in his efforts, his skills, his knowledge. Let others become more inventive and more productive, and he may receive more in exchange for what he has to offer. . . .
>
> . . . True, the millionaire has gained much from the doings of others. *But the wage earner himself owes his life to the doings of others*. . . . Both flow from the same exchange process and . . . whatever each has . . . comes to him unearned in the sense that he alone did not produce all of it. We trade because we can all get more satisfaction from our labor by that means. Vast stores are available to those who have anything to trade that others value. In the free market, each earns all that he receives in willing exchange. This is fantastically more than one could produce by himself.
>
> In order fully to grasp the process by which one can consume in a day that which he could not produce in thousands of years . . . it is only necessary for one to see that one's earning power is capable of unlimited expansion by the productivity and exchange and value judgments of others. . . . In short, each of us is the beneficiary of this productivity through division of labor and capital accumulation and investments by others. . . .
>
> . . . It is only necessary that we grasp the idea of being a beneficiary of this benefactor, this division of labor, and that we understand and appreciate our dependence on and our relationship to it.

At this point, Read comes to a very important conclusion that is in sharp contrast to the sorts of arguments used by antimarket ideologues: improving your own ability to produce for others is the best way to benefit others as well as yourself. And you should recognize the benefit to yourself in everything that potential suppliers of goods and services whom you value do to improve their productivity.

> Looked at in this light—oneself as a beneficiary and division of labor as a benefactor. . . . If we would best serve our individual self-interest . . . one should do everything possible to increase his own perceptive and exchange powers. It is only by self-improvement that one can best serve self. And,

> clearly, it is only by self-improvement that one can better serve others—that is, add to someone else's well-being.

What should our stance be toward those whom, despite their not having expropriated us, socialists urge us to expropriate?

> Self-reliance, a great virtue, should be emphasized. The way to be self-reliant is to keep off the backs of others and to engage in willing—never unwilling—exchange. This is the *free market*.
>
> . . . Others, like oneself, will work at their best if permitted the ownership and control of the fruits of their own labor. . . . This is the institution of *private property*.
>
> As with oneself, these others will act at their best creatively if left free to do so. One should, therefore, look with great disfavor on any interference with creative activity and on any inhibitions to free exchange and communication of creative action. One's own interest is impaired if there are marauders or robbers or authoritarians among these others; if there are men among them practicing violence, fraud, misrepresentation, or predation. One's own interest suffers if voters use the political apparatus to gain their own ends at the expense of the vast majority of the public. The form of government that protects the smooth operation of the free-market economy and its voluntary division of labor is *limited government*.
>
> . . . Each individual . . . must give at least as much concern to the rights of others as he does to his own . . . as eager to protect the creative energies and the free exchange and communication of others as he would his own. For each of us can truly say, "I am the beneficiary of their existence." . . .
>
> Are the riches received in a free society unearned? Only in the sense that all producers reap fantastically more than they could earn in isolation. The benefits flowing from our division of labor are available to all of us in willing exchange if freedom prevails. . . . All others who act creatively are his benefactors. . . . Hence if I would live and prosper, I shall work as diligently for their freedom as for my own.

Leonard Read understands the subjective nature of benefits and costs and thereby sees through the greatest flaw in the labor theory of value. He sees in it an assertion that the "riches" acquired through voluntary arrangements may have been unearned. But voluntary arrangements reflect gains in value for all whose rights are involved, regardless of how many labor hours were spent.

But it is also important to recognize that not all "riches" are earned. When government intervenes to override voluntary arrangements, those who gain by the political piracy acquire unearned riches, often massive in scale, and their efforts to enrich themselves impose harm on others. Not only do they fail to improve others' lives but they even discredit the labor theory of value, not having put in the hours to justify such large incomes.

42.

Getting to Know Beans about Labor

Leonard Read is committed to the belief that liberty and the private property that enable it are more moral and productive than any alternative. He thinks that if people can see what he sees, liberty's cause will be advanced. That is why he describes his many writing efforts as an ongoing process of "finding words for common sense" to reach as many people as possible.

He uses whatever might connect to people, including analogies, reverse analogies, quotations from those he thinks understand the ideas as well as those whose misunderstandings are instructive, and any example that might get the message across to those unreached by other efforts. For those who already "get" liberty, Read's writing can sometimes seem like it's hitting the same nail with too many hammers. But his aim is to communicate the case for liberty to others, and he provides a deep well of insights that can assist us.

In one interesting example, Read uses beans to understand abuses against the ownership of one's own labor in "Getting to Know Beans" and "Games We Play with Labor," from his 1970 book *Talking to Myself* (Read 1970). The image shows that labor services are no different from beans or any other commodity in any way that would justify overriding free labor markets. It also plays on the expression "you don't know beans" to argue that those who promoted such "special" exceptions for labor didn't know the first thing about liberty.

In "Getting to Know Beans," Read begins by comparing labor and beans:

> If we knew beans . . . we would know that labor is a commodity . . .
>
> . . . [But, according to the Clayton Antitrust Act of 1914,] "the labor of a human being is not a commodity or article of commerce." . . .
>
> The widespread impression that labor is not a commodity results in enormous economic mischief. If labor is not a commodity, then the argument seems to be its price (wage) ought not to be determined by competitive forces of supply and demand in an open market. In other words,

> those who argue that labor is not a commodity would in effect deny the laborer access to the market. . . .
>
> . . . [It] generally implies that we who work for a living would fare better under compulsory unionism than in the voluntarism of the market. But . . . price and exchange control . . . keeps others from seeing what we have to offer and us from seeing what they have to offer in exchange.

What causes this confusion? It occurs by confusing people with the labor services they offer.

> A laborer . . . is a human being and not a commodity. . . . But the labor or work of a human being . . . is a commodity. About this there should be no argument among those who respect the dignity of every man, and would have him free to buy and sell in the open market.

Why are the principles of freedom that apply to labor services no different from those that apply to beans or any other commodity?

> We quite properly regard a bag of beans as a commodity. But what is a bag of beans, really? . . . A manifestation of numerous forms of labor applied to the good earth. . . .
>
> . . . Labor, thus, is a commodity precisely as is the bag of beans.
>
> All except socialist planners will agree that a bag of beans should go to market and find its price at whatever level free and willing exchange dictates. But very few in today's world . . . agree that a laborer's labor should find its price in this manner . . . because most people entertain the notion that labor is *not* a commodity. . . .
>
> [Some argue that the difference] is . . . that labor has needs whereas beans do not. True . . . laborers have needs. But our labor, as one of the scarce factors of production in the economic sense, no more has needs than do the beans. The only relevant question is this: *Is our labor needed?* . . . As I increase the attractiveness of my performance, my personal needs as a laborer can be increasingly gratified.

In other words, by creating more value for others with our productivity, we also meet our own needs in the best way possible and without violating the rights of others or detracting from their ability to meet their own needs.

> These confusions as to the nature of labor lead to mischief when we institutionalize the confusions. Witness the countless political enactments that subsidize labor in employments free choice no longer demands. . . . Instead of a concentration on the improvement of labor and its market attractiveness, the movement is toward monopoly, a forming of cartels. . . .
>
> . . . [But no one] really believes that a laborer should be paid more for his labor than a free and unfettered market has to offer. Not if we test their beliefs by their actions rather than by their pronouncements!
>
> . . . [Everyone] shops around for bargains. He'll buy a can of beans from a store that offers it for 20 cents rather than from a store that offers the identical can for 30 cents. What do his actions prove? *He is attempting to buy labor as cheaply as he possibly can*, for that can of beans is but the manifestation of countless labor bits applied to the bounties of the good earth.
>
> Were the actions of these people consistent with their pronouncements backed by coercion, they would buy the 30-cent can of beans; that is, they would insist on paying more for labor than the free market offers. . . .
>
> It's human nature and common sense for every bidder to buy services [directly or embodied as goods] as cheaply as he can. But this does not force wages down. Nor is it a reason that laborers should mistrust the market. The overall scarcity of labor as an economic resource, and the competitive bidding for that scarce and valuable resource, is the only way in the world for the laborer to obtain the full value for his services and fully enjoy the manifold blessings of freedom. But we must be done with the nonsense that labor isn't a commodity.

In "Games We Play with Labor," Read takes the analogy of labor and beans and extends it to "knowing beans" about respecting the ownership of one's own labor no less than that of other kinds of goods.

> If anything can be earmarked as one's own . . . labor according to the laborer's choice is it; nothing is more surely private property. . . .

> Labor . . . is *the* human asset from which all other assets flow. . . . Thus, labor according the laborer's choice is asset number one and should, perforce, rank number one in . . . protection. But does it? Indeed not! Labor . . . is the asset most fought over and contended for; it is the butt and pawn of present-day politics; plunderers . . . play games with our labor and wantonly waste it. . . .
>
> . . . Someone else determines the disposition of the fruits of your labor. . . .
>
> . . . Each of these divestment activities recognizes no right to private property. That your labor is yours is flagrantly denied. To dispossess is to disregard private ownership, the most important of all economic tenets. . . .
>
> . . . Reflect on which is the better of these two ways: (1) you *invest* your labor as you see fit, or (2) I *divest* you of your labor and dispose of it for some good I think ought to be done. . . .
>
> Whoever you are, you advance your own interest and the interest of others better when investing your labor according to your lights.

That, in turn, is connected to the abuses of workers' self-ownership committed by labor unions and their self-interested policies. Ironically, labor unions claim the right to freedom of association, but their core efforts violate others' freedom of association in multiple ways.

> Divestment . . . is played on an enormous scale . . . in the case of organized labor. As with all cartels, the labor union today is really a branch of the Federal government, for its many special privileges are government grants, that is, they are power grants, the privilege to act coercively. . . .
>
> . . . The principled role of government is to secure each person's right to life—labor being an extension of life. This to say . . . government's function is to protect private property; its task is to secure labor against expropriation by any person or organization.
>
> Plainly, the Federal government has . . . reversed its position. . . . In the place of securing labor, it has put labor "up for grabs" . . . substituting an unprincipled for a principled role.

How does this play out?

> Labor unions have a standard formula. First, the government grants special privileges and immunities. Then workers in various trades are organized . . . and each union hierarchy, after winning an election, speaks *authoritatively* for all members—even for the minority. . . . This is euphemistically referred to as "collective bargaining." The unions bargain for—demand—above-market wages, more and more fringe benefits (which are really wages), and fewer hours of work. When the union side of the "bargain" is not acceded to . . . force or threat of force is employed to keep others from taking the jobs the strikers have "vacated." This coercive tactic—the strike—rather than economic reasoning, is the language they use to persuade.
>
> These millions of union members exert less, not more, labor—and for more money. If they get more [purchasing power], someone else must get less—be divested of a portion of his income or property. So it is that non-union workers are, in one way or another, divested of a portion of their earnings to make up the union members' "gains." . . . When some forcibly take a disproportionate share of the pie for themselves, there are only smaller pieces for the others.

This brings Read's twin uses of beans together. When we fail to see that the property rights and principles of freedom that apply to the goods we purchase apply equally to labor services, we prove that we either don't know beans about those principles or we override them to advance our own interests. When government abuses what most clearly belongs to us, it ignores and violates the desire of citizens for mutual protection. Correcting such abuses will benefit us all. "When we quit playing these games with labor, we will turn away from divestment and toward investment—to the interest of everyone."

43.

There Is No Moral Right to Strike

Leonard Read's *The Coming Aristocracy* (Read 1969a) includes an article with a title that makes a particularly bold statement about strikes: "There Is No Moral Right to Strike." Because, in our time of rising labor unrest, discussions about strikes seldom take a moral approach, his argument is worth serious consideration.

> Rarely challenged is the right to strike. While nearly everyone in the population, including the strikers themselves, will acknowledge the inconvenience and dangers of strikes, few will question the right-to-strike concept. . . . The present laws of the United States recognize the right to strike; it is legal to strike. However, as in the case of many other legal actions, it is impossible to find moral sanction for strikes in any creditable ethical or moral code.

That conclusion is dramatically at odds with, for example, prominent trade unionist Mick Lynch's assertion that "the right to strike is a fundamental human right" (quoted in Huskisson 2023). As if to respond to that claim, Read turns to what he sees as the major source of confusion behind it: the difference between the right to quit, singly or as a group, and the right to strike, which goes further.

"This is not to question the moral right of a worker to quit a job or the right of any number of workers to quit in unison. Quitting is not striking, unless force or the threat of force is used to keep others from filling the jobs vacated.

> The essence of the strike, then, is the resort to coercion to force unwilling exchange or to inhibit willing exchange. No person, nor any combination of persons, has a moral right to force themselves—at their price—on any employer, or to forcibly preclude his hiring others.

Read, for whom the distinction between willing and unwilling exchange is a major theme, recognizes that the right to quit, singly or as a group, involves no coercion of others and violates no one else's right to offer labor

or goods in willing exchanges. Strikes, however, rely on coercion, allowing strikers to violate the rights of others.

> Reference need not be confined to moral and ethical codes to support the conclusion that there is no moral right to strike. Nearly anyone's sense of justice will render the same verdict if an employer-employee relationship, devoid of emotional background, be examined.

Read turns to an illustrative example to make his point.

> An individual with an ailment employs a physician to heal him. The physician has a job on agreeable terms. Our sense of justice suggests that either the patient or the physician is morally warranted in quitting this employer-employee relationship at will, provided that there be no violation of contract. Now, assume that the physician (the employee) goes on strike. His ultimatum: "You pay me twice the fee I am now getting or I quit! Moreover, I shall use force to prevent any other physician from attending to your ailment. Meet my demands or do without medical care from now on."
>
> Who will claim that the physician is within his moral rights when taking an action such as this?

Read then generalizes the moral conclusion of his example and contrasts it with the common "right to strike" view.

> To say that one believes in the right to strike is comparable to saying that one endorses monopoly power to exclude business competitors; it is saying, in effect, that government-like control is preferable to voluntary exchange between buyers and sellers, each of whom is free to accept or reject the other's best offer. In other words, to sanction a right to strike is to declare that might makes right—which is to reject the only foundation upon which civilization can stand.

To further develop his argument, Read turns to a property-rights approach, reflecting the view in economics that different property rights provide different incentives, which produce different outcomes. He emphasizes that a job is the result of a willing exchange between parties, not something a worker can "own" without a contractual agreement or the continued willingness of the employer. But a right to strike asserts an ongoing ownership of

one's current job even without the employer's agreement, which entails a right to deny all others the right to compete for that job.

> Lying deep at the root of the strike is the persistent notion that an employee has a right to continue an engagement once he has begun it, as if the engagement were his own piece of property. The notion is readily exposed as false. . . . A job is but an exchange affair, having existence only during the life of the exchange. It ceases to exist the moment either party quits or the contract ends. The right to a job that has been quit is no more valid than the right to a job that has never been held.

Read concludes that "the censure" of the adverse consequences for individual rights and social cooperation that arise from strikes "should be directed at the false idea that there is a moral right to strike."

His argument here strongly aligns with that of one of his libertarian forebears, English philosopher Auberon Herbert, expressed in his 1891 essay "The True Line of Deliverance." Like Read, Herbert believes that government should only be empowered to use defensive force against the aggressive use of force by others so that "the state would defend the rights of liberty, never aggress upon them" (Herbert 1897).

> It is the interest of all . . . to make the free-trade footing universal for all. I do not mean that A and B should accept work on any terms other than those that they themselves approve, but that they should throw no dam round their labor by preventing C from . . . accepting terms which they decline. That is the true labor principle, universal individual choice. . . .
>
> The labour of the country never can obtain for itself, except at the expense of other labor, more than the free and open market will yield. . . . Extracting more . . . is very near to dishonesty, since he is forcing this higher price at the expense of others.
>
> . . . Leave every man free to settle his own price of labor. . . . In the case of a serious disagreement between an employer and his men, the union would remove all such men as wished to leave. . . . But there would be no effort to prevent the employer from obtaining new hands. . . . There would be no strike, no picketing, no coercion of other men,

> no stigmatizing another fellow workman . . . because he was ready to take a lower wage. All this would be left perfectly free for each man to do according to what was right in his own judgment. If the employer had behaved badly, the true penalty would fall upon him; those who wished to leave his service would do so. . . . That would be the true penalty and the true remedy. Further than that in labor disputes has no man a right to go. He can throw up his own work, but he has no right to prevent others accepting that work. (Herbert 1891)

Leonard Read and Auberon Herbert before him stand apart from the crowd in that both approach the right to strike from a moral perspective. They share a common answer to the animating question, "Do you believe in force and authority, or do you believe in liberty?" They come to similar conclusions, and, in fact, Read could easily have written the following quote from a lecture Herbert published in 1908 about the use of coercion and the violation of the rights of others that follow from the right to strike. "Force rests on no moral foundations" (Herbert 1908).

44.

Bungling Firemen

As an undergraduate, I read many articles by Leonard Read. I often found his insights valuable and unique. Every so often, I still go back and read one or two of his books in search of inspiration, as I did recently with his 1980 book *Seeds of Progress* (Read 1980). There, I found a fireman analogy I thought was worth sharing.

> Imagine this fictitious situation—the firemen of a community answering an alarm and rushing to a burning home. Failing to extinguish the fire immediately, they spray the home with kerosene. The fire worsens. The remedy? Spray it with gasoline! Still worse! On and on with "remedies" galore, each more moronic than the former. These imaginary firemen resemble the millions of political bunglers whose actions lead to "the misery and ruin of many thousands and millions of people." . . .
>
> Those who do little if any thinking for themselves are inclined to follow the millions of bunglers who loudly proclaim their know-it-all-ness and promise a heaven on earth. . . .
>
> How do our political bunglers resemble the fictitious firemen? . . . First and foremost, they have no more understanding of how freedom works its wonders. . . . Thus blinded to reality, they see what to them appears as a societal flaw, and then employ coercion to correct it. Their remedy does not work. They then double their coercions. Worse than ever: more flaws appear! Deeper into the mire of our present mess! Their cure? More and more of their foolish interventions! . . .
>
> The keynote to the good life is freedom. . . .
>
> . . . To pare over-extended government down to *its proper role* is to maximize liberty . . . that heavenly power which releases human creativity. . . .
>
> . . . When the free and unfettered market prevails, there is a race for excellence. . . .

> . . . Each of us should do our little creative things and let everyone else—no exceptions—do theirs. These trillions times trillions of little things are, indeed, the seeds of all human progress and are founded on liberty for one and all. . . .
>
> . . . We are living under government by unwise men. And the reason is that many of the wise men among us . . . fail to see what they could and should be doing to limit government to its principled role of keeping the peace with justice to all. . . .
>
> The most bothersome, frustrating and destructive of all are the millions of dictocrats who . . . *sincerely* believe that it is their duty to solve your and my problems. . . .
>
> Ever so many seekers of political office . . . actually "think" that we know not how to run our lives; but they never doubt that we are wise enough to select them as our masters! . . .
>
> . . . Individual liberty depends on the general observance of the principle of equality before the law. . . .
>
> . . . Liberty and justice are inseparably associated. . . .
>
> . . . An ideal government . . . is where no one "rules" another! Government is an agency of defense . . . keeping the peace and invoking a common justice. Period! . . .
>
> . . . What, in all good conscience, *should* be inhibited? The moral codes give the answer: fraud, violence, misrepresentation—thou shalt not steal or kill or do any evil. And government cannot perform this role when over-stepping its proper bounds.

In millions of words written over many decades, Leonard Read spent his life trying to "advance freedom by an improved phrasing of its truths." Those efforts yield much wisdom for those of us who wish to advance freedom today in small as well as large ways. *Seeds of Progress* is just one example of how even a small investment can yield substantial returns.

45.

How to Be a Benefactor—Use the Invisible Hand

When people think of the word "benefactor," they tend to envisage charitable giving to help solve problems that beset others. But that image can be misleading: charity may not successfully solve the problem, and the role of a benefactor may involve more than charitable efforts.

In "How to be a Benefactor," from his 1971 book *Then Truth Will Out* (Read 1971a), Leonard Read addresses both issues. He emphasizes the information problem that can make it difficult to help others, if not counterproductive, particularly when government, which has only the resources it takes from others to work with, arranges things. Perhaps even more importantly, he argues that by far the greatest benefits do not come from "charitable" acts but self-interested acts coordinated by voluntary exchange—namely, markets. When government interferes—whether to fix problems for citizens or to fund initiatives to "advance the general welfare"—with actions that individuals have mutually agreed on, it undermines by far the greatest mechanism of social coordination available to us.

Because such possibly well-intended but ultimately adverse government interventions continue to grow more common, Read's incisive views should command careful attention.

> When we get it into our heads that other people's problems are our responsibility to solve, we "rise" to a level of utter incompetence. However good our intention, our meddling makes matters worse rather than better.
>
> . . . Elect me to Congress and I remain as I am, my competence not improved one whit by reason of this change in occupation. . . .
>
> Before considering how we can become true benefactors, that is, how we can soundly discharge our social responsibilities, let's reflect on the mischief done in the belief that social responsibility requires everybody to solve everybody else's problems. . . .

Public policy, it seems to me, should be geared to consumer interest—that's all of us. . . . Men will serve us best in every way—including alleviation of our poverty and so on—when they stick to their own knitting! . . .

John Stuart Mill . . . was among the numerous men to grasp the pursuit of self-interest as an efficacious way of life:

> The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it.

Earlier Adam Smith had observed that

> . . . by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, [the individual] intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good. It is an affectation. . . .

If "to trade for the public good" is at best an affectation, one must then conclude that he should trade for his own good, which is to say that each of us should observe the rules and pursue his own self-interest. Thus will he best serve others and fulfill his social responsibility. . . .

The pursuit of self-interest as one's objective is not widely applauded. Generally, such action is associated with greed, avarice, selfishness. . . . This only demonstrates the extent of the confusion.

Self-interest is the motivator of human action. . . . In this sense, everyone is self-centered; self-interest is the ultimate given. . . .

[At issue is] how intelligently self-interest is interpreted. For instance, the thief thinks of his interest as best

served by stealing from others. This is an interpretation so narrow and antisocial that the more it is pursued, the more is the public good subverted. There are, on the other hand, those who so intelligently interpret their self-interest that they would never think of trying to pursue their own good by depriving others of the same right, or in any way impeding the efforts of others to obtain their own good.

What this amounts to in the final analysis is serving or observing the self-interest of others in order to best serve oneself. This is an interpretation so intelligent that the more it is pursued, the more is the public good served. . . .

The ardent pursuit of self-interest is the way to social felicity or the public good, *presuming* that individuals are not *allowed* (by government) or do not allow themselves to act at cross purposes with the freedom of others, thereby damaging their own interests. To my way of thinking, this is the way; and the more powerfully the individual is motivated to pursue his enlightened interests, the better. If this is the right way, then we should not lightly abandon it simply because we find only a few among us who are intelligent interpreters of self-interest. *Stick to the right way and concentrate on increasing an enlightened self-interest*. This is the only procedure that makes sense. . . .

What are some of these misinterpretations of self-interest? All will agree that theft is wrong. But of the millions who wouldn't personally steal from any other, what about those who will, without the slightest qualm, get the government to feather their own nests at the expense of others? What, really, is the difference? . . . The list . . . must include every individual who does unto others that which he would not have them do unto him.

And to be included, also, are the muckraking critics of producers who are trying their best to outdo competitors, to profit by best serving consumers. To make "whipping boys" out of those who serve us most efficiently is to display an ignorance of our own interests.

What, then, is the alternative to the pursuit of self-interest? It is that these people who do not even know their own interests should pursue your and my good—the public weal! This is to compound ignorance in society. For,

> surely, an individual who does not know his own interest cannot remotely know mine, let alone the countless interests of millions.
>
> . . . How best can I become a benefactor to mankind? By assuming my social responsibility. . . .
>
> Number one is to do all in my power not to interfere with the business of others.
>
> > [Here and in the next indented block, Read quotes William Graham Sumner's *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other*.]
> >
> > The danger of minding other people's business is twofold. First, there is the danger that a man may leave his business unattended to; and, second, there is the danger of an impertinent interference with another's affairs. The "friends of humanity" almost always run into both dangers.
>
> Number two is to mind my own business.
>
> > Every man and woman in society has one big duty. That is, to take care of his or her own self. *This is a social duty*. . . . The duty of making the best of one's self individually is not a separate thing from the duty of filling one's place in society . . . and *the latter is accomplished when the former is done*. . . .
>
> Minding one's own business is the doctrine of liberty. Admittedly, this has no glamour for the "friends of humanity," the social architects, the ones who would mind other people's business. To rule out their masterminding of others is to deny their peculiar pursuit of happiness.

Read draws out the importance of two crucial and interdependent, but generally ignored, problems with government efforts to "do good." First, government cannot know all the values, preferences, and circumstances necessary to effectively help others, especially when this means improving the quality of thinking, choices, or integrity. Second, when government attempts to act as a benefactor, it actually constricts by far the most important mechanism that benefits others—namely, voluntary social cooperation through free markets. That voluntary social cooperation involves the

pursuit of self-interest does not make it any less beneficial to society. Far from it, as Read concludes.

> Minding one's own business . . . serves self by serving others and is a task of a size to fit the individual . . . self-interest in its most intelligent conception, benefaction at its very best.

Read also echoes Adam Smith in "The Invisible Hand," from his 1975 book *Castles in the Air* (Read 1975a).

> I am obliged to try once more to explain the correlation between freedom and the remarkable outburst of creative energy experienced by the American people.
>
> If freedom is not seen to be the reason for progress, it may be neglected and abandoned as of no value. When that happens, we are beset by all sorts of authoritarian controls, along with shortages and rationing. . . .
>
> The lives of all persons, be they dictocrats or practitioners of the Golden Rule, are identified with self-interest. The differences have to do with how intelligently self-interest is interpreted. The man to whom Adam Smith referred interpreted his self-interest as best served by producing goods or services of the greatest possible value that he might gain the most for himself. In a word, he was minding his own business. . . . He was utterly unaware of anything more—of consequences beyond his own gain.
>
> However, have a look at the man who minds his own business; for certain, he is not minding anyone else's business. By reason of this fact, no other person is restrained by him. All others, insofar as his actions are concerned, are free men, even though that thought does not occur to him. Just a man tending to his own knitting, oblivious of the beneficial overall effects of such behavior—"led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention."
>
> The end? Clear as crystal: the freedom of everyone to express his uniqueness and seek his own gain! No restraints—none whatsoever—against the release of creative human energy. It is this end and this alone which has accounted for the American miracle. . . .

[But] invisible freedom is so rarely correlated with human progress. The progress they observe is credited instead to what they can see or feel or hear: coercive gadgetry. . . . Few, indeed, are those who realize that it is the attractive force of invisible freedom that accounts *exclusively* for whatever progress there is or ever will be. . . .

. . . True, no one can see freedom with his eyes or hear it with his ears. Freedom, in this sense, is invisible. . . .

The other way of seeing? *Insight*, with which a few are graced and many others could be.

. . . It is achieved, if at all, by reflecting on what one sees when looking under the covers, so to speak, for causal sequences. . . .

However, one does not need to reflect very deeply to see why all progress stems from individuals acting creatively as they freely choose without violating the right of others to do likewise. Merely assess your own life. . . . Adam Smith comments on this:

> The statesman who should attempt to direct private people in what manner they ought to employ their capitals would not only load himself with a most unnecessary attention, but assume an authority which could safely be trusted, not only to no single person, but to no council or senate whatever, and which would nowhere be so dangerous as in the hands of a man who had folly and presumption enough to fancy himself fit to exercise it.

. . . All insights, flashes of intuition, discoveries, inventions are exclusively personal outcroppings; these enlightenments never have been nor can they be the coercive impositions of any other person. Insights are not implants but outgrowths of the inner self.

Freedom, while invisible to the eye that only looks outward, is clearly and easily visible to the eye that can and does see within. Freedom undeniably has the case. What is lacking is the insight. . . .

Freedom is indeed the invisible hand, the magnetic force that draws to the use of each the unique talents of everyone. . . . To the bounties of freedom there is no end.

46.

Look to the Stars

How can one effectively communicate the extent that coercion damages individuals and their relationships with one another? Leonard Read often uses analogies for the impact that images can have on the reader. Sometimes he makes an analogy to a closed fist to show how much less it can accomplish than an open hand. Sometimes he puts a gun, the ultimate tool of enforcement, in that fist.

In "Look to the Stars," from his 1967 book *Deeper than You Think* (Read 1967), Read makes an analogy to a physical blow that "knocks the breath out" of society. Since many have experienced such a blow and the way it limits our ability to do almost anything until we recover, the image helps to convey the impact of coercion on society in general. We can also visualize television and movie scenes in which someone is doubled over after being punched in the gut by a bad guy who threatens even worse if some demand is not met.

The image of a physical blow applies particularly well to the general experience of coercion because, most of the time, people give in before any further punishment is delivered. The threat, however, inflicts damage even if the punishment never happens. The image also helps us see that coercion, or the threat of it, is "anything but peaceful." There is massive potential for good that could be realized if there were fewer blows disrupting our ability to function cooperatively.

> Every act of coercion in society—coercion being the forcible imposition of one's will on other—is like a damaging blow that knocks the breath out of humanity. . . .
>
> Coercion imposed on others, whether to gain something for self or for those we love or pity, or to keep others from gaining for themselves by their own honest effort, is the crowning evil of our times. Coercion is anything but peaceful. Its practice on the grand scale is a crippling blow to our human potential.
>
> Nor does it make any difference whether the coercion is inflicted directly or indirectly through one's agent, such as . . . a government. . . . I am personally responsible for any evil I support, encourage, or condone, regardless of who

> carries my banner. . . . Individual absolution is not to be achieved by collectivization.
>
> . . . So pervasive is the coercive doctrine that most Americans are unaware of any acceptable alternative.

In contrast with coercive punches to the gut, we should think about willing exchange as an alternative, mutually agreed on and therefore mutually beneficial. In fact, as I explain in every class I teach on principles of economics, wealth is created by the gains on each side of an exchange, in turn made possible by differences in opportunity costs and differences in subjective values. Economists tend to object to things like monopoly, collusion, cartels, artificial barriers to entry, taxes, costly regulation, tariffs, and high transaction costs because they wipe out wealth by obstructing willing exchanges.

> Willing exchanges . . . these wealth-creating, poverty-destroying actions give us all our net economic gain, every last measure of material progress. Unlike the doctrine of coercion, these willing exchanges—economic freedom in practice—are commonplace, unheralded, unnewsworthy. Thus, they go unheard, unseen, unappreciated. So impressive is the noisy babble for destructive coercion and so quiet is the performance of creative freedom that coercion is thought to be the cause of the progress we enjoy. Such mistaken correlations can be the downfall of any individual or group, of any nation, economy, civilization. . . .
>
> . . . Whenever coercive policies dominate the societal situation, inhibiting and prohibiting energies from manifesting themselves creatively, these energies . . . tend to turn destructive. . . . Coercion—even when backed by good intentions—must knock the breath out of humanity. . . . Coercive practices breed more coercion, and there is no remedy short of replacing these practices with freedom and willing exchange.

As with virtually any economist, my natural tendency is to focus on the gains that result from trade. But preventing the punches to the gut that we call coercion is also crucial for the growth of wisdom, morality, and creativity because these depend on freedom.

> It is unrealistic to believe that institutions founded on coercion can, in the long run, advance . . . freedom. The record is already speaking for itself. . . .
>
> . . . While the free market or willing exchange way of life is necessary for the preservation of an affluent society, it is an absolute "must" for any growth or development. *Especially when confronted with difficult or "impossible" problems, turn to freedom.*
>
> It is a simple, obvious, self-evident fact that ideas, understanding, wisdom cannot be coercively injected into the consciousness of another. Yet, such is the presumption of persons who employ the coercive techniques.
>
> If human creativity is the goal, the reliance should be on freedom.

If people didn't have their breath knocked out, they could better identify, learn from, and imitate all kinds of exemplars, ideas, ideals, insights, inspirations, producers, and methods.

> Luminaries—when freedom in transactions prevails—set the pace, lead us, if we so elect, into new and higher realms; they cut all the patterns for progress.
>
> Our human stars come from every walk of life—when not retarded by . . . fear or coercion. . . .
>
> . . . For any one of us in our proximity to absolute ignorance to attempt controlled management [of people] . . . is to reactivate a notion as nonsensical as "the divine right of kings" . . . enthronement atop the Cosmos! . . .
>
> If we would improve ourselves, we will cast off our coercionist inclinations; we will look to the stars, which is to say, we will look to excellence in ourselves and others. This is what we do when we abandon our coercive ways and put our reliance on freedom.

47.

To Avarice No Sanction

"No point in the field of political economy merits more thought and analysis than where to draw the line distinguishing the functions proper to government from the role assumed by all-out government—socialism. A good society is but a dream unless this issue be reasonably resolved." That is how Leonard Read opens his "To Avarice No Sanction," from his 1972 book *To Free or Freeze: That Is the Question* (Read 1972a).

> Government . . . means laws backed by force. To know what government should and should not do . . . requires a judgment as to which laws appeal to avarice, and a decision to avoid such laws! . . .
>
> . . . Appeals to avarice . . . [include] thousands of examples affirming the tendency to satisfy desires along the lines of least resistance.
>
> . . . Avarice breaks out, shows itself, grows and expands in proportion to the opportunities for a "free lunch" or a handout . . . because these feeding stations provide the means by which man can satisfy his desires along the lines of least resistance. . . . Men turn to these something-for-nothing sources as readily and as naturally as they turn away from higher and toward lower prices for goods and services.

Given that the word avarice is a couple centuries past its prime when it comes to usage, it is worth noting that its connotation is somewhat different from that of the word greed, which seems to have largely crowded it out. While greed means an undue desire for wealth and power, avarice adds the idea of gaining *and withholding* power from others. It is closer to covetousness, which involves desire for something *which belongs to another*.

This difference comes to the fore when talking about government policies because government has no resources it does not first take from its citizens by threatening them with coercion. To be greedy for government handouts of any sort inherently involves taking what belongs to other citizens.

> There are a few who will not stoop to the line of least resistance—persons whose moral guidelines will not let them live by bread alone. In the final analysis, a good society rests on a proliferation of this breed of men. . . . [But] the percentage of the population accustomed to the feeding stations is so great and their voting power so attractive to politicians who accommodate this weakness that the combination seems unbeatable. Nevertheless, it is worth a try.
>
> Men stand upright in the absence of things to stoop for. . . . Avarice is . . . a dormant trait in the absence of something to be avaricious about.
>
> Feeding stations, contrived by laws that appeal to avarice, are composed exclusively of the fruits of people's labor. . . . When these abound, as now, men *contend* with each other for our *property*. *They take*!

What would happen if the avarice enabled by government were eliminated? The greatest mechanism for reinforcing that avarice, with its almost uncountable tentacles of influence, would be eliminated too.

> Remove these stations. Immediately men will *compete* with each other for our *favor*. *They trade*! Why? Because this is the remaining line of least resistance. From stooping to upright men! From contenders to competitors! From takers to traders! From plunderers to benefactors! No more goodness or perfection in man than before, but only the removal from his presence of the temptations to avarice!

Read then asks how we can identify a law that appeals to avarice, so we can shun it and its adverse effects appropriately.

> How are we to judge whether or not a law has an appeal to avarice, so that we may keep it off the statute books? I believe there is a simple rule: *Never give approval to a law that "helps" anyone*!
>
> It is definitely not the function of government to take positive action in aiding or sustaining or lending assistance to any person or group or segment of society. Such "help" can only be given to one person or group at the expense of others. The only principled role of society's agency is negative; government should restrain anyone from doing injury to others. The law's job is to codify the taboos or the

> thou-shalt-nots and enforce them; that is, it should invoke a common justice and keep the peace.
>
> Any time and in every instance in which government departs from this negative or purely defensive role, avarice is released in the citizenry. Government can do all of us a service by warding off intruders; but when government pretends to "help" us, government itself thereby becomes the colossal intruder.

But how should one respond to those who say that such an approach is heartless? First, Read would assert that history shows great reserves of generosity among Americans. Second, he would point out that government help is heartless toward those whose resources have been taken away and given to others. Third, he would argue that such help does not really help those whose avarice is kindled and whose development is thereby undermined.

> To most people this way of drawing the line seems cold, heartless, and without pity. But pity, unless spiced with common sense, is what's heartless. Providing people with governmental feeding stations not only kindles the vice of avarice but it renders them helpless. The process results in an atrophy of the faculties from which recovery is next to impossible. *Helping people to become helpless is no act of kindness*.

48.

From "I Don't Know" to "I, Pencil"

Those who try to advance liberty (self-ownership and voluntary arrangements) are often challenged to give an exhaustive explanation of what would happen if a particular way that government currently dictates our lives were returned to the private sector. I know that my own efforts to meet such challenges have been less successful than I would wish. Those difficulties drive home the value of Leonard Read's "I Don't Know," from his 1965 book *The Free Market and Its Enemy*, which deals with how to successfully advocate for "the free market and its miraculous performances" in the face of such demands.

> [In] making the case for the free market . . . [one] booby trap . . . [is] the attempt to explain what would happen were the market freed of state interventionism, that is, were the activities de-socialized.
>
> Skeptics of the free market are forever asking, "Well, how would the free market attend to mail delivery? Education? Or, whatever?" Satisfactorily answer these questions, they imply, or the free market case loses by default. . . . And just as often, aspiring libertarians will stumble into the booby trap; they'll conjure up some sort of an answer.
>
> . . . A person can no more explain how the free market would attend to mail delivery than his great-grandfather could have explained how television could ever emerge from free market forces!
>
> . . . The listening skeptic will conclude that [your answer] is the free market answer and, if that's the best it has to offer, the free market has no valid case. These futile attempts to answer can accomplish no more than to confirm the skeptics in their socialism.
>
> . . . Answer honestly: "*I don't know; I never will know; no one will ever know.*"

On the surface, that sounds like poor advice. Should we just leave liberty undefended against such statist challenges? Doesn't that doom us to the status quo or worse, while our remaining liberty is continually eaten

away? No. For Read, the attempt to answer the inherently unanswerable is futile. He argues for a better way: using what is knowable.

> [If] libertarians have observed and can report on how miraculously the free market performs when not politically aborted, skepticism concerning the free market will lessen, faith in what man will accomplish when free to try will increase. . . .
>
> How would the freed market attend to mail delivery were the postal service de-socialized? I don't know! Nor could anyone have known 100 years ago how the free market would develop the means to deliver the human voice from city to city. . . .
>
> . . . No one could have predicted in 1865 what form these forces would take during the next hundred years. . . .
>
> . . . What emerges from the free market embraces the miracles of Nature, plus the miracles of human creativity. . . .
>
> . . . Nature will continue to produce these lovely miracles, *provided conditions favorable to their growth are not aborted*. You can derive from experience, not a how-to-do-it knowledge, but a soundly based faith in the dependability of the biological order.
>
> Such confident expectation is as close as any man can come to knowing how the free market would attend to an activity, were it de-socialized. All about him, in unimaginable profusion, are miracles of the free market, so commonplace that they are taken more for granted than noted and appreciated. . . . These, properly apprehended, comprise his experience. But such experience does not give him a how-to-do-it knowledge; it serves only as the basis for a warranted and unshakeable faith, a faith in what free men can accomplish—provided conditions favorable to free exchange are not aborted. . . .
>
> The aspiring libertarian . . . understands that he does not know how to mastermind the life of a single human being. . . . Even though, from his experience, he does not know what will happen, he gains a faith that miracles will happen if creative energies be free to flow.

> The accomplished student of liberty acquires a faith that men, when free to try, will perform miracles, a faith extrapolated from experience. But when it comes to predicting the shape of miracles that will show forth from creativity, he takes his place with men, not with clairvoyant demigods.

In other words, Read argues that no one can possibly know exactly what will be the result of the energy, insights, and innovations that are unleashed by reintroducing freedom where statism now reigns. It is a fool's errand to try to explain it and play into the hands of opponents who stack the deck from the beginning by imposing an impossible burden of proof.

Yet the presence of innumerable market miracles all around us, none of which could have been precisely described by anyone in advance, provide us with overwhelming proof of the power of liberty. Free men and women can not only do great things but even unimaginable things when they own themselves and can make whatever peaceful arrangements they voluntarily choose.

No bureaucrat could have met that burden of proof when the government began replacing voluntary arrangements with the many administrative departments and programs that have grown to surround us. And unlike self-ownership and the market behavior that arises from it, which have produced uncountable successes without theft, government cannot take credit for any improvement. But that is unsurprising.

> How can frustration be manipulated into harmony and increased production? Can any interference with peaceful, willing exchange, regardless of who does the interfering, do other than wreak havoc?

That conclusion brings us to Read's most famous work, "I, Pencil," which shows how great are the market miracles that go into something as simple as a pencil. He demonstrates that not only does no one on earth know how to make a pencil but there are also millions of other miracles that we take for granted. The essay justifies our trust in what people can do so long as government doesn't frustrate their possibilities and allows them the necessary freedom. I quote a version of the essay that was republished with alterations as "Only God Can Make a Tree—or a Pencil" in his 1964 book *Anything That's Peaceful*.

> I, Pencil, am a complex combination of miracles. . . .

> . . . If you can become aware of the miraculousness which I symbolize, you can help save the freedom mankind is so unhappily losing. . . . For, if one is aware that these know-hows will naturally, yes, automatically arrange themselves into creative and productive patterns in response to human necessity and demand—that is, in the absence of governmental or any other coercive master-minding—then one will possess an absolutely essential ingredient for freedom: *a faith in free men*. Freedom is impossible without this faith. Why? Without this faith there is nothing to believe in except controlled men. It's either a faith in free men and peace—or the lack of it and violence. . . .
>
> The lesson I have to teach is this: leave all creative energies uninhibited, and thus make it possible for people to organize themselves in harmony with this lesson. Let society's legal apparatus remove all obstacles as best it can, that is, let it keep the peace. Merely permit these creative know-hows freely to flow. Have faith in what free men will accomplish. Not only will this faith be confirmed but it has been and is confirmed to us daily, in evidence so abundant that we seldom take notice of it. I, Pencil, seemingly simple though I am, offer the miracle of my creation as testimony that faith in free men is a practical faith.

Perhaps Jeffrey Tucker best summarizes the lesson that runs through "I Don't Know," "I, Pencil," and the rest of Leonard Read's work: "He had this gigantic faith in freedom. He often said that he could not and would not predict the outcome of granting liberty to individuals and could not and would not speculate on the shape that society would take under conditions of freedom. But he could say for certain that whatever the results of freedom, they would be more consonant with human rights, more prosperous, more creative, and more orderly than anything that the state could manufacture through coercion" (Tucker 2009).

49.

Distinguishing Chaos from Incomprehensible Order

Many people make New Year's resolutions to improve their lives. Most involve rectifying perceived errors, mistakes, and failings in their personal lives. But making resolutions to overcome mistakes in our understanding of society, and the policies the mistakes lead to, could also be productive.

One costly mistake is the common view that market mechanisms reflect social chaos rather than an order that cannot be fully understood. This view carries an implied conclusion that coercive government policies replace chaos with order, but in fact they do the reverse.

Leonard Read recognizes this clearly, particularly in "Incomprehensible Order," from his 1965 book *The Free Market and Its Enemy* (Read 1965b). For those who would like to make New Year's resolutions to improve social coordination, it is worth reviewing his incisive words.

> Most of us claim an affinity for freedom; but if given a choice between a freedom suspected of chaos and a regimentation assured of order, we would choose the regimentation. We instinctively fear and detest the opposite of order which is chaos, and for a good and compelling reason. . . . Man's existence requires a fairly dependable level of order. . . .
>
> . . . Required is an orderly social environment, so that man can know what to expect, within limits, from his fellow man. . . . Because of this he will pay almost any price—even his freedom—for certainty, for order. Indeed, when confronted with but a modicum of chaos, he will accept with alacrity numerous variations of the goose step, those constraints which appear to minimize uncertainties and thus give him the semblance of order.
>
> Most of these "goose steps" which appear as a relief from chaos, such as controls of prices, wages, rents, hours of labor, or 'planned' production and exchange . . . are, in fact, contrary to order. These rigidities are necessarily interferences with men's choices and result in chaos.

The truth is that order and chaos in the economic realm are the reverse of what is generally supposed to be the case. . . .

. . . Order is actually born of disorder, for [millions of private decisions] do harmonize in the end. . . . Why not simply confess that these data are an order . . . which we do not comprehend? That we are unable to bring their order within our narrow purview?

The complex of creativities flowing through the minds of men . . . the "chaos" . . . if not aborted . . . result in order. . . . But there is all too little of this faith and humility as it concerns the free market. . . . As we witness millions of economic decisions made independently of each other, we will, if not perceptive, refer to them as chaotic; whereas, in fact, we are viewing an order the complexity of which cannot be brought within our limited grasp of things. What we lightly pass over as chaos is but a reflection of our failure to comprehend . . . sensing only chaos in the complex data of the free and unfettered market.

. . . But observe that one man's orders, aimed at bringing about his singular idea of order, result in everyone else's chaos. . . .

Unfortunately, the chaos brought on by one-source decisions . . . is seldom thought of as chaos once the subjects have endured the oppression . . . for a short time. . . . They come to think of their fetters as more a part of ordered than chaotic life. . . .

The more a country's economy is politically ordered or "planned," the more chaotic is production and exchange. Conversely, the freer the market . . . the more order there is in production and exchange. . . .

. . . The nature of the system prescribes the characteristics of the order and the chaos peculiar to it. . . .

. . . The free market . . . resting, as it does, on common consent, is consonant and in harmony with freely acting man. Dynamism . . . is . . . a characteristic of the free market. Order . . . exists only as this dynamism, showing forth peacefully and creatively finds unfrustrated expression. Any man-imposed goose step must breed chaos. . . .

. . . Whenever we impose . . . one-source decisions for millions of decisions made independently . . . we get chaos for our unintelligent pains. And it is axiomatic that freedom must disappear as we practice the error!

To illustrate the mysterious order of the free market, think of any one of millions of goods or services . . . forces too numerous ever to recount and which appear as chaos, but are, instead, incomprehensible order—miraculously combine to form the fantastic order . . . by which we live. Observe that the order of these is so perfect, their production and exchange and their demand and supply so nicely balanced, that we take them as much for granted as we do our next heartbeat. . . .

Now reflect on those goods and services no longer entrusted to the millions of economic decisions made independently of each other in a free market, but delegated instead to one-source governmental decisions as a way of bringing "order out of chaos." . . . Observe the imbalances and note that these are the only goods and services we ever argue about. By his method, we do not bring order out of chaos but, rather, chaos out of incomprehensible order! The very fact that these goods and services are now in a chaotic state is testimony in itself that incomprehensible order has been converted to chaos. . . .

. . . Because we differ from one another . . . human beings require freedom to express those needs and to satisfy them, individual by individual. The free market is an agency for the expression and sorting of these countless differences . . . whereby each may pursue his own proper interests without infringing upon or denying the nature and the interests of any other peaceful person. When alternatives have been sought . . . the result always has been some variation of the master-slave arrangement, with one man's order bringing chaos into the lives of others. . . .

. . . Man generally seeks a static, motionless kind of order . . . while his nature calls for an order of the dynamic variety which, unless he is highly perceptive, he looks upon as chaos. . . .

. . . Freedom in the market, without which other freedoms are impossible, can exist only as creativities of the

> peaceful variety remain unrestrained. True, this calls for an order so complex that it gives the appearance of chaos; yet, it is order, however incomprehensible. . . .
>
> When we mistake incomprehensible order for chaos we leave ourselves open to . . . deceptions of the know-it-alls. These people, when they succeed in acquiring coercive power, impose restraints on the free flowing of creative energy. Yet, the free market works many of its wonders in spite of their meddling. Unaware of how little they know, they are led to believe that it is their restraints which account for the wonders; and because of this erroneous correlation, they claim credit for the accomplishments which take place despite their subversions. . . . It is fatal if we believe their claims. For, if we do, we shall substitute their know-it-all-ness for the miraculous market; we shall look to them for our blessings . . . a fearful penalty.

Leonard Read recognizes that markets, which appear chaotic to many, in fact represent a far more advanced and beneficial social order than the alternative. It is an order that accommodates the almost infinite variety of ability, circumstance, and desire, without violating people's rights regarding themselves and what they own. No other known mechanism can generate this peaceful, sophisticated, and dynamic order. The perception of the market's order as chaos results from an inability to understand it. As a result, many support coercive government policies to impose order, but these in fact disrupt order and replace it with chaos.

He also believes that people can recognize that the order of markets, precisely because it so vastly exceeds the comprehension of any one individual or group, demonstrates why politically imposed "order" cannot work as well as the order it overrides no matter how many violations of self-ownership it commits.

Therefore, if you make resolutions, you might consider resolving to follow Leonard Read's example and expand your understanding of the incomprehensible order of markets and the all-too-comprehensible chaos imposed by the government as "order" in its place. Few things could do more to improve social coordination and, with it, our own lives.

50.

The More Complex the Society, the *Less* Government Control We Need

Americans live in a complex world. Those who argue for more statism often claim that the more complex the society, the more government control we need. They assert that even if liberty was appropriate in a horse-and-buggy age (when, for example, America began as a country), it cannot possibly be so now.

When I hear such an assertion, I first consider whether the world we face today really is more complex than in the distant past. Regarding technology, the world is clearly more complex; however, with regard to how many different skills and abilities someone in that distant past needed to survive, I am not so sure. Individuals in the past might have to build their own houses, prepare their own lands, grow their own crops, hunt their own meat, make their own clothes and shoes, fight off threats to themselves and their property with a flintlock rifle, and so on.

I look at my life in today's world, and it seems far simpler. I do have to use some technology in areas related to my job, but I don't need any of those skills from the horse-and-buggy era, and I don't need to know anything about a vast range of technologies that my quality of life depends on today. In our highly interdependent world, markets allow me to confidently rely on others who specialize in the skills I have use for but do not possess, at least when governments don't get in the way. It reminds me of the words of Alfred North Whitehead in his 1911 book *An Introduction to Mathematics* that "civilization advances by extending the number of important operations which we can perform without thinking about them" (Whitehead 1911).

Even if I accepted the assertion that we now live more complex lives, it is a non sequitur to conclude that we require more government control as a result. The reason that it is a non sequitur is well expressed by Leonard Read, who spent much of his life fighting fallacies that fueled attacks on liberty, in "The More Complex the Society, the More Government Control We Need" (Read 1962f): "Unless a person can demonstrate competence at exploding socialistic error, he is not likely to gain wide audiences for his views about the wonders wrought by men who are free."

Read begins the article by quoting an unnamed college president attending a Foundation for Economic Education seminar: "Your free market, private property, limited government theories were all right under the simple conditions of a century or more ago, but surely they are unworkable in today's complex economy. The more complex the society, the greater the need for government control; that seems axiomatic."

The response, which Read describes as necessary because it is an "oft-heard, plausible, and influential fallacy" that "leads directly and logically to socialistic planning," is described in just two paragraphs.

> Let us take the simplest possible situation—just you and I. Next, let us assume that I am as wise as any president of the United States who has held office during your lifetime. With these qualifications in mind, do you honestly think I would be competent to coercively control what you shall invent, discover, or create, what the hours of your labor shall be, what wage you shall receive, what and with whom you shall associate and exchange? Is not my incompetence demonstrably apparent in this simplest of all societies?
>
> Now let us shift from the simple situation to a more complex society—to all the people in this room. What would you think of my competence to coercively control their creative actions? Or, let us contemplate a really complex situation—the . . . people of this nation. If I were to suggest that I should take over the management of their lives and their billions of exchanges, you would think me the victim of hallucinations. Is it not obvious that the more complex an economy, the more certainly will governmental control of productive effort exert a retarding influence? Obviously, the more complex our economy, the more we should rely on the miraculous, self-adapting processes of men acting freely. No mind of man nor any combination of minds can even envision, let alone intelligently control, the countless human energy exchanges in a simple society, to say nothing of a complex one.

In those two paragraphs, the rebuttal starts from a simple situation in which one person is clearly not competent to dictate the choices of another. When the complexity is raised, the gap between what is needed to be competent and what any person or group of persons can know grows.

It seems to me that Read here does an excellent job of communicating the core of Friedrich von Hayek's message in his immensely important article "The Use of Knowledge in Society." In a nutshell, Hayek's point is that adequately informed economic decision-making requires information specific to "time and place," which only those involved in a particular market exchange can, by way of changing prices, possess. Central planning, by contrast, throws away a great deal of that valuable information in the process of centralizing it.

At a time when a supposedly efficient socialism was widely believed to be the wave of the future, Hayek showed that its necessary conditions for success could not possibly be true because throwing out valuable information necessarily throws away wealth, making efficient socialism an oxymoron rather than an enticing future.

Read's brief discussion provides a good introduction to Hayek's ideas. In fact, much of Read's writing was intended to do just that. It is still worth reading Read, whether for someone open-minded enough to begin thinking more carefully about liberty or someone who wants to become better at communicating the powerful case for it to others.

51.

The Mystery of Social Order

Order and chaos have long served as polar opposites guiding people's views of their circumstances. For instance, I have read that order versus chaos—which also represented justice versus injustice—was the primary division in ancient Egyptian religion. Much more recently, Henry Adams wrote, "Chaos was the law of nature; order was the dream of man" (Adams 1918).

But to juxtapose chaos and order as opposites may lead us astray when we are trying to understand economic relationships. The government restrictions and determinations that are sometimes called "order" may actually cause disorder or chaos, while the effects of the market that are sometimes thought of as chaotic may actually produce a far superior economic order.

In "The Mystery of Social Order," from his 1975 book *Castles in the Air* (Read 1975a), Leonard Read considers these issues, which he feels are important because how we define chaos and order profoundly affects our view of markets versus government, or expanded freedom versus extended control.

> I wish to examine . . . an extremely critical kind of order—the social order that brings progress—as opposed to the disorder that is all too prevalent in today's world.

Read starts by distinguishing order with regard to things, which is often desirable, from order with regard to human interrelationships, which often involve coercive impositions that may appear to provide order but actually cause social disorder.

> Most people seem to think of order as a fixed state . . . everything neat, trim, definable, predictable—in a word, everything in its place and a place for everything. As related to the arrangement of things, this is commendable. . . .
>
> But people are not things, and it is error of the first order to wish for fixed arrangements of people: *everyone in his place and a place for everyone*! . . . An accurate model of order as related to daily experiences with things provides a false model when it is a question of orderly human relations. . . . The order desirable for things, when applied to

> persons, means the goose step . . . and this is order's opponent, social disorder!
>
> . . . What is the arrangement? Just this: a commander—"Do as I say, or else!"—and . . . willing or subdued persons manipulated as automatons. . . . Is that kind of order appropriate for society?

Who are the modern commanders that manipulate us?

> There are untold millions today—politicians and bureaucrats—each with his own whimsical step. . . . Follow my order—on seat belts, wages, prices, interest rates, education, rationing, hours of labor, what and when to sow and reap, what and with whom exchanges may be made, what shall be used as money, on and on endlessly—do as I say! Anyone with the courage to look can see the goose step in these growing interventions—all contrived in the name of social order.
>
> This is not to deny the role of government in maintaining social order—government limited to inhibiting the destructive actions of men: fraud, violence, stealing, predation, killing, misrepresentation; in a word, keeping the peace and invoking a common justice.

There is an immense difference between government acting as a commander over people and government enabling people to be more effective self-owners by controlling certain destructive actions. Putting things in order does not harm anyone, but putting people where you want them to be or getting them to do what you want, regardless of their desires, harms them by taking away their power over their lives.

Many economic controls that have been adopted in the name of order, such as price controls, undermine both self-ownership and the order that would have been generated by markets. Prices determined by voluntary markets tell consumers how much they can buy goods for, but prices imposed by government ceilings tell consumers how much they can buy goods for in the unlikely event they're available.

> Social order . . . is mysterious because no one can describe it in advance. Opposed to the perfect cadence of the goose step is the blessing that flows from everyone peacefully pursuing his own goals, going his way, that is, every which way . . . each person responding to his own ever-changing aspirations,

> abilities, uniqueness. . . . we are what we were meant to be: originals! Yet, these very differences appear as intolerable and disorderly to most people as things not in their place. They cannot imagine freedom as a means to social order. . . .
>
> Truly, social order is mysterious, yet it is possible for us to gain an awareness of its constitution. . . . Freedom in transactions without let or hindrance! . . .
>
> I have more corn than I can consume but want cattle. You have more cattle than you can feed so you want corn. I exchange some of my corn for a few of your cattle. Each of us gains. I thank you and you thank me. Why? The comforts of life are increased for both of us. You are a blessing to me and I to you. Good will abounds. There is harmony and order. . . .
>
> Instead of only corn and cattle—the specializations of some—there are as many unique products as there are human beings, times all of the unique skills of each. . . . Who, in all the world, can comprehend, let alone manage, these! Such a thought is absurd.

The idea that markets are chaotic may arise from the different values people place on goods and services. Buyers and sellers disagree about the benefits and costs of every unit traded (which is why trade creates value and why it's worth engaging in), but their freedom to determine how many units to exchange turns their disagreements about value into coordinating agreements on the value of the marginal (or last) unit traded in equilibrium.

Market prices also resolve problems caused by changes in preferences and circumstances, everyday variables that are conveniently ignored by those who imagine a static, "neatly organized" world. Moment-to-moment changes can throw arrangements out of sync, but markets can deal with dynamic change in a flexible, peaceful way, unlike systems that dictate choices to others. Such changes require renegotiated terms, but transaction partners need only agree on the value of the last unit exchanged. Price changes, therefore, can solve temporary conflicts in a way that is jointly voluntary rather than coercively imposed by one party on another and backed by the threat of violence. In voluntary situations, changing prices can lead each individual to offer better incentives to all who might offer assistance in achieving their ends, even if the individuals and the means are unknown to them. This is a truly amazing feat of social cooperation.

The more an economy is centrally planned, the less coordinated—the more chaotic—its exchange relationships will be. The more free people are to make their arrangements in the market, the more coordinated—the less chaotic—those arrangements will be.

> The sole reason that goods do not pass freely among people . . . is that political goose steppers have interfered; they have impaired freedom in transactions . . . [so that] relations are governed by politicians . . . rather than by traders and their goods. The result? Friction, misunderstanding, ill will . . . arousing violent passions and *disorder*.
>
> . . . Think of borders, not merely as the boundaries between nations or states or counties or towns, but as imaginary lines between you and me. To the extent that we are legally prevented from freely producing and exchanging with each other, to that extent will misunderstanding grow. . . . Result: *disorder*! . . .
>
> So let all of us freely produce and exchange with . . . whom we please. . . . What is obviously appropriate for you and me is equally workable for all the human beings who inhabit this earth. All of us, here or there, near or far, exchanging our wares, *are the real ambassadors of good will and social order*. This would be a society of mutual benefit; or, we might say: The Thank You Society, under the Golden Rule.

The common view that market mechanisms create social chaos rather than order is mistaken. And the belief, based on that false premise, that coercive government policies can replace chaos with order involves a logical error. Yet those beliefs have led many to support coercive government policies under the assumption that they will bring order. They in fact disrupt order and replace it with chaos.

There are two quotations about order, chaos, and the role of government that I find of particular use in recognizing beneficial social organization. There is an aphorism, attributed to Marty Rubin, that says "order is what exists before you start arranging things." If this were taken to heart by our "rulers," they would unburden us of immeasurable costs and give us vast amounts of freedom. John Vaillant offers sharp insight into how a ruler might respond to the question "What is chaos?": "We do not comment on economic policy" (Vaillant 2010).

52.

Complexity and Consumer Interest

Two of the most common errors in economic policy are the beliefs that the interests of some should supplant those of others and that an increasingly complex society requires expanding government control.

The first belief is a clear contradiction of the idea that government should serve its citizens. It is an excuse to mistreat consumers to benefit favored groups. The second belief is an excuse to ignore the experience and wisdom we can glean from the past. History's countless government failures are treated as irrelevant while "new and improved" promises enable further government expansion.

Leonard Read deals with both beliefs in "A Consumer Looks at Freedom," from his 1971 book *Then Truth Will Out* (Read 1971a).

> Consumer interest is the premise from which all economic reasoning should proceed! . . .
>
> Bearing in mind that we live in a highly specialized economy and, thus, are thoroughly interdependent, *my consumer interest is progressively served by an increase of goods and services obtainable in willing exchange for my offerings*. That's all there is to it. . . .
>
> . . . In the final analysis, the issue is between coercion and freedom. . . .
>
> Every increment of economic progress any people enjoy has its origin in the release of creative energy—a product of freedom. . . .
>
> During America's early days, when our simple and largely agrarian economy featured some measure of self-subsistence, consumer interest was easily discerned by nearly everyone; people saw the fraud, the futility, of coercively taking the fruits of one's husbandry . . . and handing them over to others. The injustice of such tactics was readily apparent; the coercionist had no ideological leg to stand on; his arguments, however clever, were seen to be against consumer interest.
>
> But let the economy become increasingly specialized and complex—a concomitant of the free market way of

life—and no one can grasp its intricacies. . . . People thus acting freely in the market evolve patterns of interactions so complex that they defy comprehension. . . .

This quite natural, pervasive blindness is precisely the situation best suited to the modern soothsayers, witch doctors, seekers after power, coercionists, who prey on any and all observed dissatisfactions in society; or, if none are observed, they invent and whip up the clamor on which they thrive. A problem? You name it! They have an answer. And millions of people, having no answers of their own, are taken in. . . .

Complexity of relationships in no way alters the propriety of moral, spiritual, social, or economic principles. . . . The dictum that thievery is evil holds as true for the theft of a dime as for the theft of a thousand dollars. The moral principle that I owe respect to your life, livelihood, liberty applies no less to all others than to you alone.

. . . When [the authoritarian] premise is accepted, namely, that it is appropriate for them to lord it over us—implying that our rights derive from them—then they have no choice but to discard the natural law and to concoct "laws" of their own. And these "laws" must be of a kind that they think befits their premise. Their premise being faulty, it follows that their "laws" cannot rise above mere aberrations. . . .

Relevant to this thesis is a celebrated cliché: . . . "The more complex the society, the more government control we need." What this says, in effect, is that the more diversified our specializations and the more numerous our exchanges—manifestations of free, creative energy at work—the more must we submit to authoritarian regulation. In short, the more freedom works its wonders, the more coercion we need! Talk about conjuring up contradictions! But such is the nature of the soothsayers' "laws."

Choose the most brilliant person of your acquaintance and ask yourself how competent is he to run your life, that is, to decide where you shall work, how many hours, at what wage, what and with whom you shall exchange. . . . "Utter nonsense!" is your answer. Now increase the complexity by multiplying you by a dozen, or a million, or 200 million. Obviously, the more complex the society, the

> greater is our need to be free—the less can we tolerate government control! . . .
>
> "Government, in its last analysis," wrote Professor Woodrow Wilson, "is organized force." . . . [But] coercive tactics can never lead to anyone's real advantage—any more than a wrong can beget a right. . . .
>
> . . . Once the gates of something-for-nothing are opened, more and more people from every walk of life rush to the trough. . . . They let others foot their bills! . . .
>
> . . . In all of these coercive schemes, such income and capital as you and I possess are syphoned off, and with not an iota of goods and services in exchange.
>
> Do away with coercion; limit force to defense against fraud, violence, predation, misrepresentation—that is, against all destructive actions. What then? What remains? The free market, private ownership, limited government way of life—the greatest discovery in human history for working one's way out of poverty!
>
> If we will judge each practice and policy—private as well as public—in terms of how well it serves consumer interest, we will be on the right track. In the way of life thus deduced, everyone will make only those exchanges which he believes to be to his own advantage—*all* gain and *no* loss. Quite a switch from the coercive way!
>
> As a consumer, I choose freedom. But even if the coercive way had economic advantages, I would still choose freedom. There is much to be said for being one's own rather than somebody else's man.

All sorts of rhetorical tricks can be used to shift attention away from the interests people share in common as consumers. But since consumers benefit from secure property rights and economic freedom, such misdirection can enable government abuse. We should be cautious about references to "increased complexity" as a justification for violating rights. We tend to recognize such abuses as immoral and unacceptable when committed by individuals, yet many defend them as beneficial when government is the perpetrator.

Leonard Read diagnoses sleight-of-hand tricks for what they really are and urges people not to be taken in by the political equivalent of three-card monte. Americans have ignored or forgotten his wisdom, much to their own harm. Recovering it is the path to both moral and economic improvement.

53.

Fear of Freedom or Trusting Yourself

Virtually everyone claims to prefer freedom but in practice makes many exceptions.

International trade is a good example. We want free trade for selling our output, deciding how to produce that output, and for those who would like to sell to us. Such exchanges earn us higher sale prices and provide us lower costs. But we also support restrictions on competitors because they also benefit us. Our support for coercive action, given when it will line our pockets, contradicts our support for free trade.

It is harmful to freedom to believe that while freedom is good as a general principle, I cannot survive or prosper without coercion of others on my behalf—that is, that I cannot trust the voluntary actions of myself and others but I can trust the actions of those in charge of the coercion.

Leonard Read addresses this central issue in "The Fear of Freedom," from his 1974 book *Having My Way* (Read 1974), and in "Trust Thyself—Some Others Do," from his 1975 book *Castles in the Air* (Read 1975a). Beginning with the recognition that individual creativity and effort is the source of all production, not some coercive "Robin Hood," he makes a powerful case that without government seizure, society would be far more productive and that productivity would focus on what others value. This is because voluntary arrangements align the self-interest of producers with the self-interest of consumers. Freedom leads to a far better world than coercion, which degrades individuals as both givers and takers of orders.

From "The Fear of Freedom":

> Nearly everyone says he favors freedom, but in reality—with few exceptions in today's world—most people are "scared to death" of it. . . .
>
> . . . The word freedom . . . is shrouded in fuzziness. So, let me define the freedom to which I refer.
>
> I wish to be free from dictators—all of them—be they of the one-man variety or an agglomeration hiding behind an act of Congress or an administrative ruling that restrains creative actions. Leave me free to do anything I please—stupid or brilliant—so long as it is peaceful and

not injurious to others. Let me work at whatever I please for whatever I can obtain by willing exchange, whether the wage be a mere trifle or a king's ransom. Let my hours of labor range as I please . . . subject, of course, to contracts. And leave me free to exchange whatever I please with whomever I choose. . . . Free me from those people who would attend to my welfare, not with the fruits of their own labor in the voluntary practice of charity, but with the coercively exacted income of others. My welfare is no one else's business; it is a matter between me and my God, not between those who levy and those who pay taxes. Finally, free me from fraud, violence, misrepresentation, thievery—the destructive actions of men—the curbing of which is the sole role I would assign to government.

These aspirations, strung together, are what I mean by the kind of freedom of which people are "scared to death"!

Why scared? . . . It requires responsibility for self. And in consequence . . . belief and faith in freedom is all but abandoned in America today! . . .

In order rationally to embrace freedom rather than fear it, we must see and understand the two faces of freedom: benefits and burden. If we wish to enjoy the benefits we must accept the burden.

Everyone wishes to partake of the benefits of freedom, its spiritual advantages and its material windfalls. These goods flow *exclusively* from people acting creatively as they choose. The range in benefits is staggering: . . . an abundance of goods and services is at the beck and call of ordinary people in exchange for such minor performances as writing, lecturing, or hammering nails into a building. . . .

Here, however, is the rub: only a minority have the slightest idea that these benefits spring from the unfettered release of creative energy, and even fewer know how to achieve that release. Such failure may be traced to the fallacy of the False Cause: because the muscle of freedom is so strong that the benefits continue to flow from the economy despite increasing political interventions, it is all too easy to assume that the interventions cause the benefits! Many people . . . fail to see that government is not the

source of productivity but first must seize from producers any goods that it may eventually give to others.

That benefits spring from interventions is a falsity broadcast from every conceivable station: public media, pulpits, classrooms, the halls of Congress. . . .

Goods and services flow *exclusively* from individuals acting creatively and cooperatively as they personally choose. . . . *Freedom affords the only way to release the creativity of the individual*. Contrast this with the opposing formula, coercive regimentation, the dictocrat's method currently on the upswing. Instead of release, it applies restraint! . . .

. . . Applied 100 per cent, the restraints would fully paralyze; but to the extent of their application, to that extent are we kept from becoming our creative selves. What part of our property and our earnings belongs to us is their decision, not ours. The hours we shall labor, with whom we shall exchange and at what rates, even our educational efforts are less and less self-determined. . . . Let there be widespread surrender to this politico-economic heresy and the individual is no longer a man but a mere statistic.

. . . Why is it that so many people believe that our unprecedented and enormous benefits flow from the dictocratic arrangement presently in vogue?

There is indeed a myriad of political controls on the economy, but there is widespread evasion of the controls. . . . Creative energy goes coursing through loopholes, no dictocrat nor any combination of them being smart enough to foresee and to block all the ways of possible circumvention. . . . The zest to be a man rather than a statistic, the pull or push of freedom, the will to stay alive, is not easy to down. . . .

But reflect on the price for this short-term victory over the political obstacle course: destruction of character! Men, under these circumstances, become schemers. When the dictocratic trend advances far enough . . . many citizens turn into outlaws, smugglers, black marketeers, breakers of the law. . . . What, then, is the price of interventionism? Banditry, a depraved way of life, is substituted for the way of the Golden Rule that characterizes a truly free people.

. . . Meanwhile, the best and most responsible individuals—creative men—gradually lose their moral character; society slowly disintegrates at the core. This is the dreadful price we pay!

. . . The burden of self-responsibility . . . "scares people to death."

Our forefathers escaped from dictocratic arrangements and set up house in a truly underdeveloped country. They were at once free and self-responsible, neither condition being possible without the other. . . . With them it was "root hog or die," and they rooted. Also, it was trade or perish, and they traded. Trade is possible only among those who are honest—who fulfill their promises—which means that they are self-responsible and free. . . .

Our forefathers feared political tyranny. It never entered their heads to fear self-responsibility and its correlate, freedom. People do not fear the righteousness from which they benefit.

Our early American ancestors feared political tyranny because they were physically close to it; it breathed down their necks. Under the circumstances, there was worse to fear than freedom. But, as each succeeding generation receded further from the experience of tyranny—possessing little if any understanding of the effects upon men of restraint and release—people came to be less and less fearful of authoritarianism. . . . There are comparatively few among us who fear political management.

As the fear of political tyranny disappears, the fear of freedom and self-responsibility mounts, until many may be found praying thus: "Oh, Great White Father, protect me from whoever would labor for less than I; from whoever would undersell me; from the lack of possessions which I think are my due. Give unto me my cravings." Responsibility for self has become nearly unthinkable.

. . . Our hope lies in an intellectual and moral awakening. . . . We need to realize that. . . . being one's own man is better than existing as a mere fraction of a collective. Self-responsibility is the joyous key to being human!

> In the light of such understanding, Americans will no longer fear to be free. To love righteousness or intelligence or outstanding talent or virtue of any sort is to love freedom!

Read argues that the fear of freedom arises from misunderstanding both freedom and its alternative, some form of coercion. But he also sees that fear of freedom entails a lack of trust of people in themselves and others as well as greater trust in those who would like to decide for them in their place.

> From "Trust Thyself—Some Others Do":
>
> It is a safe guess that 99 percent of the adult population in America today believe in more governmental control over citizens than I do. These millions would say that I go too far in suggesting the limits that should be placed on political power.
>
> In other words, *I believe more in those millions than they believe in themselves*! . . .
>
> . . . All creative activity stems from individuals, for only individuals have ideas, thoughts, insights. Creative men and women are not and cannot be induced to respond creatively to the gun or sword or the threat of violence. The notion that I can command you to have a constructive, creative idea is absurd. . . .
>
> . . . If government—physical force—is ruled out as the stimulator, director, manager of constructive and creative activities, to whom are such activities left? . . . To individuals acting voluntarily, cooperatively, competitively, privately—as they freely choose. Government's role can be likened to that of an umpire: to see that there is a fair field and no favors, that no special privilege is extended to anyone—not one!
>
> . . . However, most everyone insists on an exception; . . . they have a "but" that pleads a special privilege for themselves that only an omnipotent government can bestow. Let government stay within bounds—except to serve them—is what it amounts to! . . .
>
> These "leaks," however, give the case away. . . . One "but" endorses the principle of omnipotent government no less

> than two "buts" or a thousand. What could be more irrational than the notion that one should feather his own nest at the expense of others but let not others feather their nests with what is mine?
>
> *Trust thyself—some others do*! . . . Who are these others? . . . [Those] who have more faith in free men than in fettered men. We trust the 99 percent more than they trust themselves! . . . They do not go all the way in trusting themselves as free and self-responsible citizens. We trust them, as such, all the way. They harbor a fear that they could not thrive without some governmental largesse—plunder. We would replace that fear with the confidence that these millions, acting freely, cooperatively, competitively, voluntarily, privately would maximize their chances of success. We are far more on the side of their true self-interest than they are!

Read's conclusion in this essay contrasts admirably our trust in ourselves and others—and therefore in freedom—with our trust in coercion—which degrades individuals and destroys freedom. The moral of the story is well worth remembering.

> Anyone who consistently stands for the freedom philosophy trusts the exception-makers more than they trust themselves. Their road leads to all-out statism, which would destroy them as free and self-responsible individuals. The road of the freedom devotees, on the other hand, opens the way to all persons to become their potentially creative selves. Trust thyself, not dictocrats! No one else who ever lived can manage your life as well as you can. No one can achieve life's purpose by remote control.

54.

Living by a Premise

In addition to his prolific publication record, Leonard Read gave many speeches and presentations both to Foundation for Economic Education audiences and others. Among those presentations was a commencement speech given at Hillsdale College and published in *Imprimis* in 1972 (Read 1972b).

The speech emphasizes three major themes which run throughout Read's works: our human purpose to grow or "hatch" (a process that can commence at any age); how living by the premise of universality that Immanuel Kant wrote about can aid in that hatching; and recognizing what that implies for the role of coercion in society.

> I am here not to attend your graduation but to share in your commencement. . . .
>
> . . . I have traveled a great deal of life's road, the one you are now commencing, and therefore I wish to share with you some of the lessons I have learned along the way. . . .
>
> First, do not wait until middle age, as I did, to adopt and live by a basic premise, a fundamental point of reference. Do it right now—at your commencement!
>
> Twenty-five years ago I realized that there was no chance of living the consistent life unless one did his reasoning from a basic premise. . . .
>
> What, then, is man's purpose as I see it? It is to grow, emerge, evolve, or to use an expressive term, hatch. . . . If adopted, how does one use such a premise? He merely listens to his own or anyone else's ideas, stands the ideas up against his premise, and if they do injury to it or are antagonistic to it, he is, perforce, against them. Or if, on the other hand, they are in harmony with it, promotive of it, he is, perforce, in their favor. In a word, one's own position can be quickly established once this idea gets to working. . . .
>
> I am suggesting that you get for yourself a premise as soon as possible.

Read then turns to such a premise, "the principle of universality," which he frequently relies on in his arguments in favor of liberty and its blessings. It comes from Immanuel Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant 1969).

> Immanuel Kant had a premise that he called good will. By will he did not mean what we mean when we say 'peace on earth, good will toward men.' It had nothing whatsoever to do with intentions. By will he meant an individual's ability rationally to will his own actions. And the adjective good could be used only if one could apply the principle of universality to his maxims.

Read proceeds to ask when the will qualifies as good, according to Kant's criterion, and when it does not.

> Let me give you a sample maxim: I have a moral right to my life, my livelihood, my liberty. Is that good? According to Kant, that is good only if you can concede that same right to every other human being—universality. Can I? Yes, I can. Therefore, it is good. Let me reverse the maxim and watch it come through. I have a moral right to take the life, the livelihood, the liberty of another. Is that good? According to Kant, that is good only if you can rationally concede the right of murder, theft, enslavement to every other person on earth. Can I? I cannot. Therefore, it is not good.

He then argues that the universality principle can provide a very powerful basis for maintaining consistency in one's beliefs.

> Is it not obvious that with such a premise as Kant's one can be reasonably consistent in his positions, provided he reasons logically and deductively from his premise? Of course one has to live in the world as it is, but this should not alter one's proclaimed positions. Never approve or condone anything that is not consistent with what you believe to be right: in a word, one's eyes should always be on the search for truth.

He turns from the premise of universality in the search for truth to the central importance of liberty and its requirement of a stringent limitation on coercive force.

> [One should be] interested in individual liberty, for unless this prevails, self-development is restrained. This objective requires a knowledge of what government should and should not do. You have no chance to assist in the advancement of liberty short of knowing where to draw the line between activities appropriate to government and those appropriate to individual choice and decision. In order to know what government should and should not do, you must know what government is and is not.
>
> . . . The essential nature of government is organized force. . . .
>
> . . . The distinction between you as an agent of government and you as a private citizen is that as an agent of government you have a constabulary—an organized force—behind you: you issue an edict, and I obey or take the consequences. If this organized force be removed from behind you, you are restored to private citizenship: you issue an edict . . . [and] I do as I please!
>
> . . . I can symbolize [organized force] by the clenched fist. . . . What this fist can and cannot do . . . [is] what government should and should not do.
>
> . . . This fist . . . can inhibit, restrain, prohibit, penalize. . . . What . . . should be restrained, penalized, prohibited? The answer to that question comes clear and clean in the moral codes over the millennia, . . . namely, the destructive actions of men such as fraud, violence, predation, misrepresentation, thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal. Force can accomplish this, and this alone. . . .
>
> All of this is by way of saying that we should confine government to inhibiting the destructive actions of men, and that all creative actions, without any exception whatsoever, should be left to men acting freely, privately, cooperatively, voluntarily, competitively.

He then discusses how the limitation of force plays a unique role in American history—in advancing what the preamble to the Constitution calls the "General Welfare" but also in its subsequent decline.

> Do you perceive the liberating ideas that led from special privilege and the freezing of human energy toward the amazing creativity that flows out of equal opportunity for

> all? And perhaps the current decadence in ideas and moral scruples that are taking us from the new back toward the old? . . .
>
> . . . The greatest danger to your world or mine is error. . . . So long as truth is absent, error will have free play. . . . Clearly, such personal and societal solutions as lie within our reach are the truths we perceive. And this is precisely where our respective worlds can meet to our mutual advantage—provided we seek every means to grow . . . to look into every nook and cranny for truth . . . moving toward a more harmonious existence, of cooperating to free, rather than freeze, our perceptions and relationships.

Leonard Read encourages his listeners to pursue consistency with truth—that is, to follow the principle of universality. In general, liberty is consistent with truth but coercion is not. "Regard each day of your life as commencement" on that path, Read concludes. That idea deserves serious thought from everyone, not just those graduating from Hillsdale College a half century ago.

55.

Individual Rights, Freedom, and the Better World

Most people are in favor of a better world; but ask them how to achieve it, and they may not have anything substantial to say. Without a solid understanding of why the world isn't better and a positive vision of achievable changes that would improve society, the desire for a better world does not translate into a better world in reality.

Leonard Read is one of a very few who understands why individuals—and therefore, society—fall short of what they can become. He also offers a path toward improvement. His vision involves expanding freedom by defending (or reestablishing) the individual rights and responsibilities that make it possible. Read's 1973 book *Who's Listening?* (Read 1973) offers an example of his wisdom.

> Growth in consciousness is possible only in intellectual and spiritual freedom, that is, when the self is freed from managing or judging the lives of others. The better world begins with that man who attends to his inner freedom. . . .
>
> The nemeses to outer freedom are . . . coercive impositions by other persons. Other people are to run our lives and not we ourselves! . . . Carry this way of life to its logical conclusion and I am no longer a man but only putty to be molded—and by whom? . . . Those so blind . . . they naively believe they can manage your life better than you can. . . .
>
> . . . An example cannot be found where domineering in practice—man lording it over man—has resulted in success. The record is failure, without exception. . . .
>
> . . . Individual freedom is now being abandoned in favor of the old, the primitive, the domineering way of life. . . .
>
> . . . The dominators in office merely echo those in the population who believe their interests are best served by living at the expense of others. . . .
>
> . . . The individual who stands for even one special privilege endorses the principle of coercive exploitation . . . that living off others is morally admissible. . . .

You have the right to do with yourself and your own whatever you please so long as your pursuits . . . do no injury to me and mine. . . . I owe you nothing more than noninterference. . . .

. . . We have now . . . strayed so far from reason that mere wishes are regarded as rights. . . .

Correction of this tendency requires recognition of a simple truth: *only the individual has rights*. It is exclusively the individual who experiences justice or injustice, who evidences morality or immorality, who gains or loses. . . . The collective, no matter how you lump it, has neither mind nor conscience, nor any other personal attribute—not one! . . .

. . . We stand not as a mass but as millions of discrete individuals . . . each entitled to precisely the same right as any of the others, all equal in every respect before the civil law.

. . . What is it that you as one of these millions owe me and all the others? Exactly what l owe you, whoever you may be: *the opportunity*, without let or hindrance, to go as far creatively as your aspirations and talents will permit! This is what l owe you—no more no less. . . .

Unfortunately, there is nothing in the nature of government that enables it to curb its tendency to grow at the expense of the individual. If there is to be any limitation upon government, it must be developed in such a way that it does not call for additional governmental activity; in other words, it must be expressed personally and voluntarily in the form of self-discipline . . . of such high order that one is not tempted to covet his neighbor's success, or even to subsidize—and thereby aggravate—his neighbor's alleged ignorance or poverty or other defect of character.

In a word, mind one's own business. . . .

In brief, living off others by a resort to coercion, once condoned, even in minor and exceptional cases, tears the principle asunder. . . . Break the principle and no stopping place remains; logic and reason, right and wrong no longer serve as guides. . . .

. . . To save . . . unfortunates by breaking a principle, simply because one cannot see how they otherwise would

> be saved, is to endanger a whole nation; it is to reduce everyone to a status begging compassion.
>
> . . . Living off others by free and willing exchange is right. . . . If we cannot envision its practice as . . . the more beneficial to all, let us not abandon the principle but look to the limits of our own vision. Freedom works! . . .
>
> . . . Any arrangement that calls for coercive control over the creative actions of citizen—these are social disasters. . . .
>
> . . . There are today, during a moral and economic crisis in human affairs, no more than a very small minority who in their own names are speaking, writing, and standing for what is right about private property and voluntary exchange, and what is wrong about coercive intervention and unlimited government. . . .
>
> . . . Were all individuals devoted to their own improvement . . . there would not be a seeker after power among us. . . . There could be no authoritarianism. . . . Individual liberty prevails in a society where no one lords it over others, and the person tending to his own growth feels no need to rule others.

I am old enough to remember the Superman who was devoted to "Truth, Justice, and the American Way." But now there seems to be a wide gap between the American way, on the one hand, and truth and justice, on the other.

Leonard Read understands this gap and offers insightful counsel on how to begin the process of restoration. Since only individuals can receive benefits or be harmed, and since ultimately only individuals make choices, improvement rests not with collectives but with individuals. The heart of enabling that improvement, therefore, is equal and equally inviolable individual rights, which keep people from imposing coercion on others but make every mutually voluntary arrangement possible. In recognizing that, Read points the way to a truly better world. But our wisdom needs to grow to reflect his own if we are to achieve that world.

> Freedom's flag is high on the mast only when it is raised there by wisdom. And it is sustained there only by an enduring and continuing wisdom. . . . Raising freedom's flag above half-mast depends on an improving discernment of truth and justice.

56.

The Two Commandments

For years, I have told my public-policy classes that the biggest problems stemming from government come from violations of two of the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's possessions" and "Thou shalt not steal." Coveting is a significant impetus behind the intention to harm others to benefit oneself; stealing is the action triggered by coveting.

If government makes its central task the prevention of such violations, it can advance the general welfare by more effectively protecting all of our property from theft and better enable the voluntary relationships that property rights make possible. National defense protects you and your property from international hostilities, and police, courts, and prisons protect you from your neighbors. Unfortunately, government has become an accepted way to violate what it is supposed to defend.

I was always proud of my "two commandments" approach, but then I discovered that I was not the first to come up with it. Leonard Read, in "To Each His Own," from his 1968 book *Accent on the Right* (Read 1968), lays out the importance of those two commandments for any real civilization.

> Thou shalt not steal! To know that stealing is wrong again implies knowledge of an alternative that is right: in this case, *to each his own*, usually referred to as private ownership. The ancient taboo against stealing presupposes that an individual has a right to the fruits of his own labor.
>
> Recognizing as evil the taking of that which belongs to another certainly antedated The Decalogue by many centuries. . . .
>
> . . . "Thou shalt not covet" is even more basic than "thou shalt not steal"; if no one coveted the possessions of another, there would be no thievery. But the cure of covetousness—counting one's blessings—requires a state of awareness rarely achieved unto this day. . . .
>
> To refrain from stealing is the genesis of civilizations! Only two points need to be understood . . . for this assertion to ring true. First, civilizations rise and fall with the rise and fall of individual freedom. Second, individual freedom rises

and falls to the degree that private ownership—the absence of stealing—is respected and adhered to. Individual freedom is out of the question wherever and whenever private ownership does not prevail!

. . . Creative outbursts—the mark of civilization—bear a direct correlation with increase in individual freedom. . . .

This private ownership thesis rests, fundamentally, on a defensible assumption, namely, that one person has as much right to his life as any other. If an individual has a right to his life, it logically follows that he has an equal right to sustain his life, the sustenance of life being the fruit of one's own labor or what can be obtained for it in peaceful exchange. Conceding the foregoing, we must conclude that livelihood is but the extension of life.

Thus, to steal is to take life. Not to steal is to respect life; it is to endorse and to hold sacrosanct the institution of private ownership.

. . . It is self-evident that no civilization could be born without the observance of this taboo. The institution of private ownership—to each his own—has spawned all civilizations!

. . . Were [thievery] the general practice, we would quickly descend into another dark age. A resort to law would be useless; the gendarmerie also would be thieves! . . .

While the institution of private ownership has been given lip service over the centuries, by the people and governments alike, actual observance has been more of form than of substance. . . . Few among us understand that private ownership can be universally endorsed in principle and completely obliterated in practice. Nor is it widely understood that the forcible taking of income, beyond that required for the principled functions of government, has the same eroding effects on private ownership as stealing. Legalizing the compulsory transfer of control still amounts to the destruction of private ownership.

It takes no mental giant to realize that individual freedom and, thus, the flowering of civilization are possible only where private ownership prevails. Merely imagine

> owning absolutely nothing required for your own livelihood. Your life would be in the hands of others.

Read sees the twin sins of coveting and theft as the greatest threats to civilization. The latter, motivated by the former, undermines the fundamental basis of the voluntary arrangements that create civilization—private property. He also knows that government is powerless to stop people from coveting. To refrain from coveting requires individual moral commitment and growth. Government could even worsen the situation by offering itself as a vehicle to convert covetousness into public policy. As a result, Read recognizes that the essential function of government is to maintain the principle of "to each his own" and that any time government fails to defend citizens from invasion or itself infringes on their rights, it acts as an impediment to civilization rather than its servant. As Read so succinctly puts it, "*To each his own* is a fundamental maxim for civilized men!"

57.

Violence, Liberty, and Love

Virtue is widely preached and admired. Most people consider themselves virtuous. Yet in our society, virtue is being increasingly crowded out by violent coercion. This suggests a need to consider the differences between social coordination based on virtue, which is voluntary, and that based on coerced virtue, which actually degrades what we consider good and lets the muscles of virtue atrophy from lack of use.

Leonard Read thinks hard about this distinction throughout his long writing career. But perhaps his most insightful discussion is in his 1950 book *Students of Liberty* (Read 1950), which frames the discussion in terms of violence versus love.

> The principle of violence finds widespread application. . . .
>
> . . . A citizen is compelled to give of the fruits of his labor to meet the . . . "needs" of others. Freedom of choice as to what he does with his own capital and income (property) is denied him. Freedom of choice gives way to the dictation of an authority, a dictate backed by brute force—violence! . . . Suppose that he decides not to pay his share of the cost because . . . [it] is not a proper function of government. . . . What would happen?
>
> . . . The government's claim becomes the first lien on everything a citizen owns. . . .
>
> The reason that most of us do not think of government coercion as meaning obedience under penalty of death is because we almost always pay our part of the cost . . . before the shooting begins. Usually we acquiesce before the ultimate meaning of compulsion is realized. . . .
>
> . . . Violence was merely less exercised here than previously in other countries. This meant that government was strictly limited; that there was a minimum of organized violence. . . .
>
> Many Americans understood this agent, government . . . could be used to suppress, restrain, restrict, destroy. Restriction and destruction by government, to be useful,

must be confined to that which is bad: fraud, private violence, conspiracy, and theft or other predatory practices. But police force—violence by government . . . —is, patently, not a direct, creative force. Thus, in the original plan, all creative functions were to be carried on by such voluntary, cooperative, and competitive elements as the population contained. Government was to be confined to the protection of personal liberty. . . .

It was because this practice of the principle of violence was on a lesser scale than ever before attempted that accounted for the mighty surge that was America's. Here, in this country, was a greater release of free human energy than history reveals in any other instance.

. . . I am opposed to the initiation of violence in any form, by anybody, or by any agency, government or otherwise. I cannot make inspired violence square with ethical concepts. Aggressive coercion . . . is at odds with principles which seem right. How this brute force can be used and be considered moral, except to restrain violence otherwise initiated, is beyond my capacities to reason. . . .

. . . As a private citizen, the predatory person is only one *among* millions. As an agent of government he becomes one *over* millions. . . .

. . . I have no faith, whatever, in any "good" that can come from these measures based on violence. . . .

Resorts to the political means . . . [are] plunderbund . . . another term for communalization by force, or legal thievery. It is simply the political device by which citizens pool their votes to extort the fruits of the labor of others for the purpose of satisfying the desires of themselves, their group, their community, or their industry. . . . Plunderbunds [arrange] life by violence. . . .

As a tree can stand a small bunch of mistletoe, so can a healthy economy stand instances of socialism. But as mistletoe could spread and destroy the tree on which it feeds, so can communalization by violence expand and destroy the society from which it derives its parasitical existence. . . .

. . . *The cause of our ills is a reliance on the principle of violence*. Violence breeds violence. The more of it we practice,

the more of it will we rationalize as justified—even "needed." . . .

. . . Most of these governmental activities can be maintained only under violence. . . .

. . . Responsibility and authority go hand in hand. . . . When we as citizens turn over to the state an item in the responsibility for our welfare, the state assumes a proportionate authority over our lives. Thus, as we turn over to the state item after item of our own welfare responsibilities, we eventually arrive at the all responsible state. When we reach this point we will have over us, ipso facto, the all-authoritarian state. At the head of this state will be a gangster, a craftsman in violence, by reason of the nature of the job to be done: administering violence. . . .

The alternative to violence is love . . . the application of the kindly virtues in human relations such as tolerance, charity, good sportsmanship, the right of another to his views, integrity, the practice of not doing to others what you would not have them do to you, and other attributes which result in mutual trust, voluntary cooperation, and justice. . . .

. . . The principle of love. Most persons will contend that it is the principle we ought to practice but that it is impractical. But try to find the individual who believes it impractical so far as *he* is concerned. He doesn't exist. Each person thinks only that it is others who are incapable of decency. . . . Simply ask of yourself these questions: "Would I initiate offense on those who would not offend me? Am I unjust, naturally, to the point where violence is required to restrain me? Am I unable and unwilling to deal honestly with those who would deal honestly with me?" Your answer, as mine . . . is: "No!"

. . . Everyone thinks himself essentially good, and capable of the high performances which interdependence requires in accordance with the principles of love. Why, then, don't we be done with violence? Primarily, the reason is because of an all-too-common inhibiting fallacy: . . . "No one else is quite as good and dependable, if left to his own resources, as I am." . . .

Reason will not support the idea of the principle of love as impractical. . . . We practice the principle of love in most of the aspects of our daily lives without recognizing it as such. . . . But where violence once takes the place of love, most of us seem to consider the matter settled, and conclude that love has forever been ruled out as possible of application. . . . Aid on a voluntary basis has been all but forgotten as a possibility. Violence has so far superseded love in actual application that people are referring to this act of violence as charity! It is as if they insisted on doing good even though they had to kill someone in the process!

. . . Where violence is taking us is apparent. . . . This would be a better world if a trend away from violence could be begun and a trend toward love initiated.

. . . What are the conditions essential for this needed reversal in form?

Love prospers only in liberty. It generates and grows among free men; only with difficulty among men ruled by the principles of violence. As violence begets violence so does one personal act of kindness beget another. . . .

. . . The natural aptness of man, acting as a self-controlling, self-responsible person, is good. The restraint of this aptness is evil. It is, then, in liberty that man's natural aptness evolves toward its potentiality and its goodness. . . .

Responsibility and authority always go hand in hand. . . . Authority over one's own actions is lost precisely in the degree that responsibility is shifted to someone else. . . .

. . . Self-improvement [is] the only practical course that there is to a greater liberty.

. . . In short, understanding liberty is knowing how to live in a condition where voluntary efforts will be at the maximum, and the use of force against persons at the minimum.

. . . History, for the most part, is a record of violence. Present-day talk and writing . . . for the most part is an argument for the rearrangement of the rules of violence. An appreciation that progress is possible only when human energy is freed of restraint has been gained by but few men. . . .

> . . . Liberty . . . is the absence of its opposite—restraint or coercion. . . .
>
> Once the reliance on self is removed, once the responsibility for a portion of our being has been assumed by another . . . we cease to think about or apply our ingenuity to the activities thus transferred. . . . Creative thought is abandoned by man as a free and thus a creative agent, and assumed by man as an agent of coercion. . . . Understanding liberty requires that we think in these lost areas . . . of replacing violence with voluntary action.

In *Students of Liberty*, Read demonstrates the superiority of a society whose organizing principle is virtue over one whose organizing principle is coercion backed by the threat of violence. Our society is heading down the wrong path, but Read's insights can help us reverse course. And to do so is crucial because, as he concludes, the alternative is not appealing.

> The principle of love prospers in a condition of liberty; . . . the principle of violence thrives in the absence of the principle of love; . . . the principle of violence is destructive of ourselves, of civilization, and of mankind.

58.

Leonard Read's *Conscience on the Battlefield*

Leonard Read was long at the forefront of libertarian belief in America. And because he believed that "war is liberty's greatest enemy, and the deadly foe of economic progress," Read thought about war as well, particularly in his 1951 pamphlet *Conscience on the Battlefield* (Read 1951), probably his most controversial essay. In our seemingly warlike time, his thoughts are worth recalling.

As Jacob Hornberger wrote, it is "one of the most profound and thought-provoking pieces on war that has ever been written" (Hornberger 1991). Written at the peak of the Korean War, "it focused on the moral responsibility of the individual citizen for the wrongful acts of his government—in this case, the moral responsibility of the individual soldier for participating in foreign wars waged by his government."

Read sets the stage in his prologue:

> My interest is the study of human energy, how to free it from restraints, and how to abolish coercion of man by man—in short, how to enlarge the area of individual liberty, economic and otherwise.
>
> We, as a people, are bent on a contrary course from which there appears to be no possible return short of a willingness—indeed, an insistence—honestly to examine every tenet we now hold. An analysis of liberty that would, at this juncture, prove "popular," would be useless. . . . Unless it is highly controversial, and challenging to a great number of persons, it cannot be consistent with the advancement of human freedom. For popular ideas and liberty are now not in accord. Indeed, they are at odds.
>
> War [is] the most brutal of man's activities, [so] anyone who even presumes an interest in economic affairs cannot let the subject of war, or the moral breakdown which underlies it, go untouched. To do so would be as absurd—indeed, as dishonest—as for a cleric to avoid the

> Commandment "Thou shalt not steal" simply because his parishioners had legalized and were practicing theft. . . .
>
> War is liberty's greatest enemy, and the deadly foe of economic progress. If war is evil there must be a way to avoid it; there must be a rationale, a type of thinking, patterns for living, that lead to peace. These ways cannot be simple or we would invoke them. They must be difficult to practice or we would employ them. They are not easily explained or we would know them.

To address these issues, Read, who experienced the terrors of war when he was a young man aboard the troopship *Tuscania* when it was sunk by a German submarine, asks himself, "What would be my thoughts in a similar situation today?" So, Read imagines an uncomfortable internal dialogue about war between his older self's conscience and his younger self, taking place as he was "dying on a battlefield near the 38th Parallel in Korea," because "such probing is the preface to understanding, and frankness is the prelude to intelligent discussion."

What core indictment is the young Read concerned about being judged for? "While in many respects you were an excellent person, the record shows that you killed many men . . . and were also responsible for the death of many women and children during this military campaign."

The essay is then filled with "buts" that the young Read puts forward in defense of his individual innocence in killing people, adeptly illustrating the many excuses all of us come up with to justify ourselves as innocent of blame. They include blaming American foreign policy rather than his own choices and the argument that the Korean War was a "just war." The young Read argues, "I had no choice, I had to do what others called my duty. Otherwise, my friends and fellow-citizens would have dubbed me a traitor." He also claims, "I did not know that I was doing a wrong" and that there must be different standards for governments than individuals.

However, the responses of the older Read's conscience to the younger Read's "buts" are the centerpiece of the essay.

> Did you kill these people as an act of self-defense? Were they threatening your life or your family? Were they on your shores, about to enslave you? . . .
>
> . . . The judgment which now concerns you must be rendered on you as an individual. . . . Governments and

such are simply phrases, mere abstractions, behind which persons often seek to hide their actions and their responsibilities. . . . To take a human life—at whatever age, or of any color—is to take a human life. You imply that you feel no personal responsibility for having killed these people. . . . Yet, they were destroyed. . . .

. . . You and others . . . surrendered your standing as individuals. By this drifting from personal action to mass action, a dilemma was created for you and for all members of the collective: the choice of shooting others or having others shoot you for forsaking them; to do as the others demanded, or to risk the collective's penalty for non-conformance. . . .

Man . . . cannot escape an accountability for his part of any collective action of society in which he participates . . . some responsibility for its collective misdeeds, either by commission or omission. . . .

. . . If Conscience has any function, it must be as a guide to the avoidance of evil acts and their inevitable consequences. . . .

. . . Think in terms of *who* initiates violence. It is evil for any person or set of persons to *initiate* violence against another. But, if another initiates violence against you, and if he dies in the process of your protecting your life, does he not, in reality, suffer death at his own hand. . . . He initiates the action in which he is killed. He, not you, is the author of the equation that destroys him. . . .

. . . As it is proper for you to protect your life against violence initiated by another, so is it proper for a number of you to protect yourselves against violence initiated against your number. But that is all. There is no extension of moral rights by reason of how numerous you are. . . .

Force! Coercion! Violence! Forever, it seems, people proposing force as a means to eliminate force! . . .

. . . Bad ideas . . . are not to be destroyed by killing the persons who voice them. . . . It's the ideas that have to be considered. The route to better ideas is evolutionary and peaceful. . . . Better ideas are not shot into persons with guns. . . .

What you are saying is that . . . coercion, the essence of the dictator idea, produces better results than man in free action. . . . Isn't it possible that the way to advance freedom is to behave like free men rather than like regimented men? . . .

There is strength only in that unity which results from like-mindedness. This originates with an individual's actions being in unity with his conscience. . . . Its extension depends on the consciences of men being similar. The result is similarity in action—actions dictated by conscience instead of by Caesars. That is the kind of unity voluntary service produces. . . .

. . . There is enduring strength only in free men. When the truth of this is learned to the point of it's becoming a profound faith, then—and then only—will mass murders be removed from the agenda of men. . . .

Involuntary service . . . is the restraint of men's faculties by another, the denial of self-control . . . an idea that has no possible manner of being right. . . .

. . . You opened your ears and mind to . . . the fallacy that you could turn your responsibilities and problems over to government, to answers that declared you could take a part in evil and not be responsible for it. . . .

. . . The mob . . . is not subject to eternal damnation or Immortal Glory. It is but a name given to an arrangement which consists only of individuals. Can other than persons be responsible for acts, be the acts done alone or in association? . . .

Government . . . differs from the mob in that it is organized, legalized, formal force. . . . But . . . it, also, is but a name given to an arrangement which consists only of individuals. They—and they alone—are responsible for what they do collectively as government. They—and they alone—are subject to Judgment.

Most persons believe some form of government to be necessary as a means of achieving maximum liberty. They, therefore, surrender more or less of . . . their personal rights and responsibilities—to government. Unless they understand the nature of coercion—its power only to suppress,

restrain, destroy—they place but little limitation on that portion of themselves which they surrender to this coercive agency. They surrender to government far more than the logical function of collective and equal protection of the life and property of all citizens. . . . Unless they comprehend coercion, many of them will use this medium of government to rob in the name of charity, plunder in the name of prosperity, and kill in the name of God.

. . . Another failure . . . is failure to grasp the idea that when the right to act on behalf of one's self is delegated to another, this cannot reasonably be done without an acceptance of personal responsibility for the results of the delegated authority. . . . Let authority for your actions be transferred to government, a collective, without an exact accompaniment of your personal responsibility for that authority—without an equivalent transfer of that excellent discipline which controls your own actions—and, ipso facto, you will act without personal discipline as a result of the mistaken belief that there can be authority without responsibility. . . . This, I submit, is the illogical process . . . which leads you to kill another person without remorse or a feeling of guilt. You label the action by another name, "the government," "the army"; so you thoughtlessly conclude that the responsibility is attached to another name also . . . not recognizing that the consequences of your actions are irrevocably yours, whether you personally conduct them or whether you employ government, a collective agency, to administer them?

Unless there is a strict awareness of the limitations that should guide delegated authority, and an equally keen realization that even a limited, delegated authority demands total personal responsibility, there will of necessity result a vast amount of evil action. . . .

. . . It is only when the agenda [items] of government are minor and incidental to the aggregate action of a people that the agenda can even be understood, let alone accepted personally as one's own. If the agenda . . . extend(s) beyond the narrow confines of defending all citizens against violence and predacity initiated against them by others, the

> minds of most men will not be able to grasp what will be suffered in their names.

Leonard Read then gives a brief summary in the epilogue.

> The collective! Government and its over-extension! The process of de-personalization! The method that divorces action from conscience! Action and conscience together tend to virtue—apart, action has no anchor! Action and conscience together lead to justice—apart, action becomes indiscriminate! Action and conscience together, and I would not kill—but divorce them, and I become a party to mass killing. Why did I not think of these ideas and their meaning?

Reading *Conscience on the Battlefield*, it is easy to see why it was so controversial. But I believe much of the controversy derived from the same sort of excusing "buts" we all have a tendency to deploy to protest our innocence even when we are guilty. Leonard Read recognized the discomfort involved. Such wrestling motivated him to write about rather than ignore these issues. Similarly, despite any discomfort, wrestling with these core questions can benefit us as well in our warlike times.

59.

Amoral Markets versus Immoral Coercion

I am a believer in the power of liberty—voluntary relationships—to bring out the best in individuals and, therefore, society. But that well-founded belief makes it painful to see markets—voluntary exchange—blamed for social problems while government coercion is supported as a means of achieving some utopian vision.

Why, for many people, are unattainable utopian visions more attractive and inspirational than liberty, which can achieve the best society that is actually attainable and break the trend of increasing statism? Leonard Read considers this issue carefully and offers insight on it in "Free Market Disciplines," from his 1969 book *Let Freedom Reign* (Read 1969b).

In "Free Market Disciplines," Read shows that liberty's failure to gain more adherents than utopian statism can be, in part, traced to the fact that the ends envisioned rather than the means involved are often what motivate people. And since, unlike utopian visions, freedom and free markets cannot be proven to have no objectionable results, liberty can be saddled with an inspirational deficit. But to attribute unpleasant results to markets misplaces the blame. Restricting voluntary arrangements (beyond preventing force and fraud) cannot solve the real problem; moreover, it hobbles the market's ability to coordinate cooperative and productive plans, causing harm in the misguided attempt to accomplish good.

> The free market is the only mechanism that can sensibly, logically, intelligently discipline production and consumption. For it is only when the market is free that economic calculation is possible. Free pricing is the key. . . .
>
> . . . [But] it is necessary to recognize the limitations of the free market. The market is a mechanism, and thus it is wholly lacking in moral and spiritual suasion; further, it embodies no coercive force whatsoever. . . .
>
> [Quoting W.H. Pitt:] "The market, with its function for the economizing of time and effort, is servant alike to

the good, the compassionate, and the perceptive as well as to the evil, the inconsiderate, and the oblivious." . . .

Given a society of freely choosing individuals, the market is that which exists as a consequence—it is a mechanism that is otherwise non-definitive. It is the procession of economic events that occur when authoritarianism . . . is absent. . . .

. . . In a word, the free market is individual desire speaking in exchange terms. . . .

When the desires of people are depraved, a free market will accommodate the depravity. And it will accommodate excellence with equal alacrity. It is "servant alike to good . . . and evil."

It is because the free market serves evil as well as good that many people think they can rid society of evil by slaying this faithful, *amoral* servant. This is comparable to . . . breaking the mirror so that we won't have to see the reflection of what we really are. . . .

The market is but a response to—a mirror of—our desires. . . .

Instead of cursing evil, stay out of the market for it; the evil will cease to the extent we cease patronizing it. Trying to rid ourselves of trash by running to government for morality laws is like trying to minimize the effects of inflation by wage, price, and other controls. Both destroy the market, that is, the reflection of ourselves . . . attempts not to see ourselves as we are. . . . To slay this faithful, amoral servant is to blindfold, deceive, and hoodwink ourselves. . . . Denying the market is to erase the best point of reference man can have. . . .

. . . The market is a mechanism and is neither wise nor moral. . . . *The market is an obstacle course*; before I can pursue my bent or aptitude or obsession, I must gain an adequate, voluntary approval or assent! . . . My own aspirations, regardless of how determined, or lofty, or depraved, do not control the verdict. What these others . . . will put up in willing exchange for my offering spells my success or failure, allows me to pursue my bent or not. . . .

> . . . Eventually, in a free society, the junk goes to the junk heap and achievements are rewarded.
>
> I believe that anyone should follow his star; but let him do so with his own resources or with such resources as others will voluntarily supply. This is to say that I believe in the market, a tough, disciplinary mechanism. . . .
>
> [An] individual, in the free market, considers how much of his *own* property he is willing to put on the line. . . . The free market gives short shrift to projects that are at or near the bottom of individual preferences.

Read sees that markets are an amoral servant: they enable people to do whatever they want better but cannot be relied on with certainty to only do good and inspirational things. If we reform ourselves, markets will do no harm. Read has great faith that such improvements are possible, that "eventually, in a free society, the junk goes to the junk heap and achievements are rewarded." In contrast, coercively "reforming" ourselves by law does not eliminate the cause of harm and does little to stop it. It does, however, throw out the amoral servant that enables the accomplishment of more good than any other mechanism.

He recognizes that liberty—voluntary arrangements that spring up when rights involving oneself and one's production are protected—provides the means of achieving what is achievable in advancing society. As we develop ourselves, we each have more to offer others. This, plus what freedom has historically accomplished beyond our ability to predict, are at the heart of his inspirational vision.

To follow Read's path of increasing liberty, we must develop our ability to "see" the unseen good that can only be achieved by freeing the ability to peacefully create and innovate. We must also learn to see the inherent failings of coercion. Through this binocular vision, liberty appears far more inspirational than any statist alternative. Read argues again and again that if others are to "catch" that vision, we must articulate it as well as we can.

60.

Seeing the Light on Looting

Having written about public policies for three and a half decades, I have often struggled with the slipperiness of words. Using words without thinking about them gives power to those who can manipulate their meanings to mislead others, and it encourages equivocation—changing the meaning of a key term or phrase in the course of an argument—in public policy discussions, a logical fallacy that can be used to create many ways to rob Peter to pay Paul with the coercive power of government.

Leonard Read, who wrote about public policies for about a decade longer than I have, also combats the distortions created by the 24-7 linguistic confusion factories that encourage government growth and coerced redistribution. Read's reflections on this issue in "Loot," from his 1978 book *Vision* (Read 1978), are worth examining because current politics revolves around more looting than ever before.

> Ideas . . . shape our way of life and mold our very being. However, we think in words; and what we mean by the words we use, and what others think we mean by them, may range from the bright lights of creativity to the dark shadows of destruction [due to] their misuse and the consequent misunderstanding and confusion. . . .
>
> . . . We also need . . . words to explain how freedom works its wonders. And what words will best describe and explain freedom's opposite? How does one make it clear that accepting coercively confiscated "benefits" is just as sinful as the confiscation itself? . . . And the same is true of thousands of . . . ignoble schemes.

Read is concerned with a particular distortion here: mistaking special privilege and plunder for benefits by ignoring violations of rights.

> The acceptance of plunder is as sinful as the plundering itself. But where are the words to portray the sinful nature of plunder?
>
> Many of us, over the years, have used the words "special privilege" to describe freedom's opposite—the plundering way of life. But these words no longer serve to describe

> the undesirable; they have lost their derogatory impact. So widespread is the practice of plunder that what were at one time devised as special grants of political power—and were more or less clearly recognized as such—are now claimed as the inalienable rights of the special class spawned by such privileges. Among pigs at the trough, there is no stigma.

Read has a different term in mind to restore the earlier, more accurate understanding and negative connotations of special privilege and plunder.

> Why not use another word that has a chance of clarifying our meaning? Let's try an acronym: . . . Living Off Others Thoughtlessly—LOOT! Looting is an accurate synonym for plundering and still carries a sharp verbal sting which most of us would rather avoid.

How does thinking in terms of government-enabled looting improve our society?

> Many among us today are *thoughtlessly* living off the labor of others.
>
> Throughout history there have been looters of this or that variety. But we seem now to be confronted with a *progression* of such harmful behavior. As more and more people have abandoned moral scruples—feathering their nests at the expense of others—looting in its countless forms has more and more become a way of life.
>
> Emerson wrote, "Thought is the seed of action." Honest, moral and sound economic thought results in commendable and creative action; each person serves himself through serving others. But if dishonest, immoral and uneconomic thinking prevails, the results must be harmful, not only to others but to self as well. Such thoughtlessness, then—rather than careful thought—is the seed of actions which presently bedevil us. And the seeds, more often than not, are words with garbled meanings . . . warped from bad to good. . . .
>
> It is increasingly evident that countless millions in all walks of life thoughtlessly "live" off others; they loot and they don't know it. They are the unwitting victims of their

own naivete, stumbling along the devolutionary road . . . with pride instead of guilt.

Frederic Bastiat helps us to see through this shameful practice:

> See if the law [government] takes from some persons what belongs to them, and gives it to other persons to whom it does not belong. See if the law benefits one citizen at the expense of another *by doing what the citizen himself cannot do without committing a crime*.

Read thinks it is important for individuals to recognize looting for what it is across its almost endless forms, including the government-enabled looting from which they benefit.

> Government would not take from some and give to others were the others to reject the loot. It follows then, that the recipients of ill-gotten gains are as sinful as the government which effects the transfer by force.
>
> Only the hardened professional criminals . . . would personally so indulge themselves. The vast majority would refrain from immoral action were it a you-and-me relationship. Honesty would prevail.
>
> However, when government does the coercive taking and handing out, most citizens—those who do no thinking for themselves—are relieved of any sense of indulging in crimes. Instead they experience a false sense of absolution. . . .
>
> In compiling a list of looters, let us take care not to confine it just to the "beneficiaries." . . . We must label all looting as such. . . . We must include all instances where coercion, be it private or public, is employed to "benefit" some at the expense of others. The list is too long to count. . . .
>
> . . . Is there a community in the U.S.A. without . . . monuments to looting? . . .
>
> Plundering is so rampant that everyone is involved more or less—unconsciously participating or trapped beyond escape. . . . What should we critics of looting do? What might the right tactic be?

Read concludes that we benefit from shedding light on looting.

> Perhaps another acronym may help to clarify the creative force: Living In Good High Thought: LIGHT!
>
> To see the LIGHT we need what I would call intellectual binoculars. We should see, not with just one, but with both eyes.
>
> The vast majority see with one eye only and, as a consequence, observe merely surface or false appearances. . . .
>
> Fortunately, there are those who see with one eye the falseness of LOOT, and with the other observe the true LIGHT. To thus see beneath the surface brings enlightenment—encouragement. Growing numbers . . . are beginning to see the destructiveness of plunder and how freedom works its unbelievable wonders.

Government looting and efforts to supercharge political extraction have been metastasizing for decades since Leonard Read wrote these words. There is a greater urgency to think clearly about these issues because the payoff to overcoming them has become greater. Read offers a great description of what is involved in this task: to see the destructiveness of plunder and how freedom works its unbelievable wonders.

61.

What Should Government Do?

Toward the end of his 2012 State of the Union speech, President Obama says, "I believe what Republican Abraham Lincoln believed: that government should do for people only what they cannot do better by themselves, and no more" (Obama 2012). Ironically, Obama was one of American history's most aggressive expanders of the scope and reach of the federal government. There is a cognitive dissonance between these quoted words and the laundry list of things he wanted to do for—and to—Americans.

The gap shows the limitations of the power of such words to constrain centralized power. Ritual obeisance to the rhetoric often accompanies inconsistent behavior, such as inflating government's role beyond advancing the general welfare. Liberty gives ground even while it is praised as the moral high ground.

Fortunately, this issue has already been considered. In his 1969 book *Let Freedom Reign* (Read 1969b), Leonard Read writes about a loophole in the way that limited government is defended that allows President Obama to eviscerate its limitation in practice. His depressingly timely essay "Governmental Discipline" merits careful consideration.

> During the last century, several of the best American academicians and statesmen—in an effort to prescribe a theory of governmental limitation—have agreed: *The government should do only those things which private citizens cannot do for themselves, or which they cannot do so well for themselves.*
>
> . . . This is meant to be a precise theory of limitation. . . .
>
> . . . The government should, indeed, do some of the things which private citizens cannot do for themselves. . . . Codifying and enforcing an observation of the taboos gives the citizenry a common body of rules which permits the game to go on; this is what a formal agency of society can do for the citizens that they cannot, one by one, do for themselves. . . . And no more! . . .
>
> This proposal . . . does not go far enough. It has a loophole, a "leak," through which an authoritarian can wriggle.

. . . What [citizens] will not do and, therefore, "cannot" do for themselves is to implement all the utopian schemes that enter the minds of men, things that such schemers think the citizens ought to do but which the citizens do not want to do. . . .

Reflect on the veritable flood of taboos—against other than destructive actions—now imposed on the citizenry by federal, state, and local governments. And all in the name of doing for the people what they "cannot" do for themselves. In reality, this means doing for them what they do not wish to do for themselves. . . .

How might we state this idea, then, in a way that, . . . if followed, would restore government to its principled, limited role—keep it within bounds? Consider this: The government should do only those things, *in defense of life and property*, which things private citizens cannot properly do each man for himself.

The only things private citizens cannot properly do for themselves is to codify all destructive actions and prohibit them. . . . Neither the individual citizen nor any number of them in private combination . . . can properly write and enforce the law. This is a job for government; and it means that the sole function of a government is to maintain law and order, that is, to keep the peace . . . a task much neglected when government stops out of bounds. . . .

All else—an infinity of unimaginable activities—is properly within the realm of personal choice: individuals acting cooperatively, competitively, voluntarily, privately, as they freely choose. In a nutshell , this amended proposal charges government with the responsibility to inhibit destructive actions—its sole competency—with private citizens acting creatively in any way they please. . . .

The government is engaged in countless out-of-bounds activities . . . what private citizens will not do rather than something they cannot do. . . .

. . . We allow government coercively to commandeer resources that private citizens will not voluntarily commit to such purposes. In other words, private citizens are forced to do things they do not wish to do.

> . . . Why are private citizens forced to do what they do not wish to do? After all, the formal coercive agency of society—is *their* agency!
>
> We have one test, and one only, for what private citizens really wish to do: those things they will do voluntarily! . . .
>
> But here's the rub: There are those who believe we do not know all the things we want or, at least, are unaware of what is good for us. These "needs" invented for us . . . have no manner of implementation except by coercion. In a word, these people who would be our gods can achieve the ends they have in mind for us only as they gain control of our agency of force: government.
>
> And the primary reason why they can force upon us those things we do not want is our lack of attention to what are the proper bounds of government.

By asserting his devotion to limited government in his State of the Union address, President Obama tries to blunt criticism of how undevoted he truly is. He mouths the same words as those who have truly been concerned about limiting the overreach of government, but he clearly means something else than they do. His hypocrisy evokes words by Abraham Lincoln: "We all declare for liberty; but in using the same *word* we do not all mean the same *thing*. With some the word liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself, and the product of his labor; while with others the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men, and the product of other men's labor. Here are two, not only different, but incompatible things" (Lincoln 1953).

62.

The Something-for-Nothing Syndrome

While most of Leonard Read's writings were published through the Foundation for Economic Education, not all of them were. For instance, his 1937 *Romance of Reality* predates FEE's 1946 founding. Another example is a speech Read made to Hillsdale College—"The Something-for-Nothing Syndrome" (Read 1976b), published in its December 1976 issue of *Imprimis*.

Since the syndrome that Read discusses in his speech seems only to have worsened, with a particularly sharp acceleration in the last few years, it is worth reconsidering now.

> The something-for-nothing syndrome . . . is a social malady . . . a vicious one.
>
> Without exception, those devoted to the freedom way of life . . . look with disfavor on those who advocate and participate in something-for-nothing schemes . . . feathering the nest of some at the expense of others. . . .
>
> Most politico-economic policies in our time are in response to the demands of this or that special interest group, while the general interest is ignored. Further, the long-run effect is overlooked in order that short-run "gains" may be achieved. This is the road to disaster, and no turnabout is possible short of a greater reliance on "time-lapse thinking." Let Walt Disney's demonstration explain. . . .
>
> Disney planted a rose seedling and made a motion picture of its growth, flicking a single frame every day or so until the plant was mature and the rose had bloomed. When he showed this film on the screen at sixteen frames per second, we then witnessed the whole beautiful phenomenon—the unfolding of a rosebud—in less than a minute.
>
> Disney's time-lapse photography enabled us . . . to see the long-run effects of short-run causes. This is why I urge some time-lapse thinking.
>
> . . . [Public-policy analysis] requires that time be collapsed as related to future effects of present causes.

. . . The easiest and perhaps the only way to be certain that a short-run action is a gain or loss is to discover what its long-run effects will be. Why? . . . Constructive service of the individual's purposes or of the general interest can never emerge from destructive means. Thus, we must collapse time, resort to time-lapse thinking. . . .

. . . Most people find it unnecessary to do time-lapse thinking to put thievery in its proper place. However, millions of these same people not only condone but participate in legal plunder, that is, they urge government to do the looting for them. They see nothing wrong with this; indeed, they regard the loot as a gain. Perhaps the only way for them to set their thinking straight is a resort to time-lapse thinking. . . .

. . . Project such practices into the future and observe the self-evident consequences. Time-lapse thinking will reveal the fallacy; it will serve as an eye-opener, a needed shock treatment.

Reflect on the businessmen who seek political protection against competition, domestic as well as foreign. Assume the universality of this craving for short-run "gains" and then assess the future. What would be the economic picture? It would look like ancient feudalism or medieval mercantilism or modern communism. . . .

From such thinking stems this helpful conclusion: fret not for the morrow, only for today. Why? Because the morrow is a life-style edifice structured from today's actions. . . . If today's actions are as right as one can make them, then the morrow will be as good as possible. . . .

The Good Society is something rare and precious and is taken for granted. That it requires no human input—nothing—is a naive assumption by nearly everyone. . . .

Rising above the prevailing mediocrity requires of the individual that he or she recognize that a good society stems exclusively from the habit of right thinking and doing on the part of its citizens. . . . A decadent society is the penalty of sloppy thinking and careless action. . . . We cannot have this desirable something for an unforgivable nothing. . . .

Simply stated, the vast majority of present-day Americans are the beneficiaries of an enormous momentum in whose rise they have had no part. Thus, they assume that the beneficence which graces their lives is simply their due, a natural blessing.

Stated another way, the victims of this particular something-for-nothing syndrome are . . . unknowingly riding on the coattails of the few who have the intelligence to realize that take-out presupposes input. To rise above mediocrity is . . . participating right now in an input of thoughtful, responsible citizenship that makes an increasing take-out possible not only for self but for generations yet to come. . . .

The Good Society is impossible in the absence of a natural aristocracy as defined by Jefferson: "There is a natural aristocracy among men . . . composed of virtues and talents." . . . Nonsensical notions are held in abeyance when the natural aristocracy is riding high, when there are standard-setters of excellence. . . .

. . . Given such high exemplarity, people refrain from making fools of themselves before those held in high esteem. . . . But let there be a slump in the aristocracy—as today— . . . and the foolish notions come forth as termites from a rotten stump.

The remedy for this malady? The restoration of a natural aristocracy. . . . This consists of citizen participation in the search for improved ideas, ideals, moral perfection, virtues—integrity being the foremost—and talents. . . .

. . . An absolutely necessary component, if we are to be graced with a good society, is what I have referred to as "organizational common sense." Our beliefs must consist of this, not only in understanding but in strict observance—day-to-day adherence thereto.

. . . Man is at once a social and an individualistic being. Find out what the social side is, and all else is individualistic—each free to act creatively as he pleases. The individual decides how he shall act creatively. However, when it comes to the social side, neither I nor you nor anyone else should decide for the others. That's organizational

nonsense: dictatorship—the Command Society, not the Good or Free Society.

The spokesman for the social side should be none other than an agency of society which we call "government." And to keep it in bounds as an agency of a free society—not letting it get out of bounds as now in the U.S.A.—requires an organizational common sense presently lacking. . . .

Government is said to be a necessary evil. The saying appears to be without merit. For can anything be at once necessary and evil? True, all governments have had a history of evil-doing, more or less. However, it does not follow from the experience that their good is indistinguishable from their evil. Their evil begins when they step out of bounds. The only necessity is that their evil actions be discontinued. Such an achievement is unlikely until the principles prescribing the boundary lines are searched for and found.

Very well—how do we draw the line between what government should do, and what government should not do? . . . Find out what the fist [of government force] can and cannot do and we will know what government should and should not do. . . . What, in all good conscience, should be restrained, prohibited, inhibited, penalized? . . . Curb the destructive actions of men—fraud, violence, predation, misrepresentation—thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, and the like. This is all that government can do as a helpful agency of society—period.

But it is even more important to recognize what government—a physical force—cannot do. It cannot create. Government is not a creative force, never has been, nor can it ever be. . . .

. . . Limit government to the suppression of destructive actions and leave all creative actions—no exception . . . to men acting freely, voluntarily, cooperatively, competitively, privately. To me, this is the first step in organizational common sense.

The second step, though seldom perceived, is no less important: Responsibility and authority should always be dispensed commensurately. . . .

> While this principle often seems to function in private affairs . . . it appears to have no recognition at all in social affairs. . . . The millions of our political dictocrats . . . assume authority over our lives . . . all financed with our earnings and savings . . . all authority and no responsibility. As a result, it is the citizenry who are penalized for the errors of dictocrats. . . .
>
> Were our vision to become a reality, those in government would no longer devote themselves to promoting their inept brand of good with our resources. Instead, they would confine their efforts to removing the bad in order that the truly good might prevail. . . . Everyone would be free to act creatively as he or she pleases—freedom in its ideal sense.

Read covers a lot of ground in "The Something-For-Nothing Syndrome." He starts with the syndrome itself and how it manifests itself through government policy, represented by an almost uncountable number of more-for-me-at-someone-else's-expense policies and proposals.

Next, channeling Henry Hazlitt's *Economics in One Lesson*, which recognizes the problems that arise when long-term effects of policies are ignored, he suggests time-lapse thinking to improve our ability to see those effects that take longer to manifest themselves. Long-term effects are no less real or relevant than short-term effects of the same process. When individual firms, for example, attempt to protect themselves from competition, they produce the adverse long-term effect of mercantilism.

This was one of Read's major themes, and he illustrates it with a Ralph Waldo Emerson quote, cited by him more often than any other: "Cause and effect, means and ends, seed and fruit, cannot be severed; for the effect already blooms in the cause, the end pre-exists in the means, the fruit in the seed" (Emerson 1841).

Read applies time-lapse thinking to the thievery of government policies that benefit some and largely ignore the costs to others in the present and the often far larger costs in the future. He contrasts such policies with what is necessary to create a good society. "If today's actions are as right as one can make them [as with avoiding thievery], then the morrow [for society] will be as good as possible."

In contrast to a good society growing out of improvements made by creativity and wise choices, which Read calls "the habit of right thinking

and doing on the part of its citizens," many Americans who now advance or support thievery policies not only ride on the coattails of earlier generations who thought and acted better but even erode them, undermining both the present and the future.

Read, in a nutshell, argues that "right thinking and doing" lead to a good (or better) society, but "sloppy thinking and careless action" eliminate the possibility of a good society. Furthermore, ignoring the massive burden on society created by the latter increases the burden imposed in the long run.

To prevent such burdens, Read endorses Thomas Jefferson's call for a renewed "natural aristocracy," which entails "citizen participation" not in undermining society but "in the search for improved ideas, ideals, moral perfection, virtues—integrity being the foremost—and talents."

A necessary condition for such efforts to be as productive as possible is what Read calls "organizational common sense," which grows out of the different comparative advantages of government, on the one hand, and individuals and their voluntary arrangements, on the other. Government's one comparative advantage is coercion. The question is, "What should coercion be used for?" Read's answer: "Curb the destructive actions of men. . . . This is all that government can do as a helpful agency of society—period." Individuals and their voluntary associations, however, have a comparative advantage in everything creative, so we should "leave all creative actions—no exception— . . . to men acting freely, voluntarily, cooperatively, competitively, privately."

If we assign to government only the responsibility to inhibit harms and nothing else, along with the necessary authority for the task but nothing more, and leave to individuals everything else, then "everyone would be free to act creatively as he or she pleases—freedom in its ideal sense." Freedom in its ideal sense is the goal—promising almost unimaginable benefits—that motivates Leonard Read. At a time when the goal of policy seems to be the opposite of freedom, it is worth considering what he has to say.

63.

Follow Read's Pattern

Americans have recently been through some of the most heated presidential campaigns in history. Competition has in large part become a matter of trying to buy votes with promises to abuse the liberty of those voters. But what would a campaign by a candidate who was a true lover of liberty look like?

Leonard Read's 1948 book *Pattern for Revolt* (Read 1948) follows the imagined campaign of a "true liberal" presidential candidate. In sharp contrast to the current statist campaigns and Brobdingnagian levels of theft and violations of rights, this campaign follows Thoreau's advice to "let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect . . . [as] one step toward attaining it" (Thoreau 1849).

In the foreword, Thomas Nixon Carver describes *Pattern for Revolt* as "strong meat, probably too strong for stomachs that have long fed on government pap and can't imagine how they can get along without it." It is well worth reading for every "informed liberal who loves liberty better than power." Consider how much more respect someone who agrees with the following argument might command compared to those leading today's political races.

> The all-authoritarian state marches on its merry way, not only unhampered and unchecked, but aided and abetted by an ever-increasing number of gravy-trained citizens. . . .
>
> . . . The people [have] no choice except between power-seeking personalities and groups, each offering a superior administration of government-as-master. Such a choice was and still is no choice at all. . . .
>
> . . . Party leaders . . . are asking today "What must we say and do to win votes?" The voice of expediency . . . must mislead because it represents the rejection of moral principles for the hope of temporary gain.
>
> . . . A truly liberal party . . . would have been asking "How can we liberate the individual from the tyranny of the State?" . . .
>
> . . . The mere changing of parties or personalities is not important. The transfer of power from one party to the

other is important only if the ascending party has principles which it is important to substitute for the principles of the party in power. . . .

. . . Choosing among numerous aspirants to office who vie with each other as sponsors of public housing, socialized medicine, the nationalization of education and a host of other socialistic items is like choosing between Tweedledee and Tweedle-dum. That is not an election in any significant sense . . . but only in an unimportant personality sense. . . .

. . . Not only will [an] office-seeker resort to expediency to attain office, but, once in office, his very enterprise will prove a handicap to the nation. . . .

. . . A man who seeks and secures public office . . . will try to make it a bigger and more powerful office.

Government should not be so expanded. . . . Men in government, therefore, should be those who aim at making government as unnecessary as possible. Contraction, not expansion, should be the aim. . . .

You said you wanted someone who believed in a Federal Government of limited powers, in free competitive enterprise, in freedom, generally, and in individualism. I am an ardent disciple of these tenets. . . .

Freedom is an assertion of man's God-given free will, a resurrection of man from deadening arbitrary authority. . . .

The principles which brought America to the greatest heights of freedom yet known on earth are easily forgotten . . . [but] what will our collectivistic opponents be able to do in extending their authority over the people if the people subscribe to the principle of liberty? . . .

. . . Our assignment is to cultivate an understanding of freedom—in ourselves and in others. . . .

In every field where arbitrary authority is imposed we shall inquire how it may be removed and replaced by a reliance on the initiative and enterprise of individual citizens. We must give to the art of self-government its American renaissance. . . .

We need patriots who will stand against wrong even though they cannot see the time when right will triumph.

Our adversaries . . . seek for themselves human shepherds. . . . *They want to be led.* . . .

As liberals and individualists, we can agree that we do not want to be led; that we do not want to "lead" by force. . . .

. . . The only way to guard freedom is to remove, to destroy, unwarranted restrictions and coercion. . . .

. . . There was a general acceptance of the idea that governments should have only *limited* powers and functions. . . .

Today, however . . . opponents of freedom, in this country as elsewhere, have pre-empted the language of freedom so extensively that we how attempt to speak on behalf of freedom now find it difficult to convey our meaning. . . .

. . . Our plunderstorm economy is a matter of common knowledge . . . which none but the most reckless politician or public figure dares attack. All the signs point to a long and successful run for these legalized rackets. . . .

. . . The first reason is a deep-rooted conviction on the part of millions that they have, by reason of their existence on this earth, a *right* to share in the property of others. The idea that this is a wholly immoral notion has never occurred to most of them. . . .

The result is this group-thirst for political plunder. . . .

. . . There is no cure at all except to re-establish in the minds of people the normal boundaries of personal right. The present situation calls for an understanding of where personal rights end and infringement on the rights of others begins. . . .

. . . In the hope of plundering more from others than others succeed in plundering from us, we have voted away the inestimable benefits for which government and law were originally instituted.

We founded our government and wrote our laws on the premise that the individual citizen has certain inalienable rights and that government and law should protect those rights. . . . While it is perfectly obvious that we should

restore government and law to their proper functions, limit them as we originally intended they should be limited, it is equally obvious that this is now impossible until false ideas are removed, those false ideas which brought about the perversion of government.

As long as people entertain these false ideas about rights and property, so long will they seek their fulfillment though government and the law. . . .

. . . The choice is only one of going on with the filthy business or getting out of it entirely. . . .

In a variety of ways this nation has legalized plunder . . . as we seek prosperity by the fruitless process of picking each other's pockets. . . .

. . . *Coercion is my first objection*. . . . No man has ever lived who has been big enough or competent enough to apply it, justly and wisely, to any responsible adult person, arbitrarily. . . . Tyranny is only arbitrary coercion carried to its logical consequence. . . .

Using governmental coercion to protect your goods from a thief is proper. Using it to protect a thief in the taking of your goods is improper. It makes no difference whether the thief be a thug or a legally recognized pressure group, using the democratic process. . . .

Given freedom of opportunity, protection from fraud, violence and predation and a dependence for our welfare on our own initiative, we can and will look out for ourselves better than will any other person or any governmental agency. . . .

. . . [Government failure arose from] their guarantee to meet "human needs" and their inability to meet the ever-growing demands and impossible responsibilities to which they thus exposed themselves. . . .

The real reasons for most of the present and recent distress inhere in the suppressions of liberty, in the sabotaging, wittingly or unwittingly, of the free competitive economy, which alone produces general prosperity. Re-establishing a free economy is the only road to progress. . . . Free enterprise can be re-established only by the repeal of

> those laws, rules and regulations which impede it. *I stand for their destruction.* . . .
>
> . . . I am a spokesman for the philosophy of government which is an American heritage. . . .
>
> . . . Nowhere else have men so successfully escaped from arbitrary authority. . . .
>
> This American philosophy of government is premised on our countrymen being free men. This is what our birth as human beings gives us a right to be; that is what we ought to be; it is the object to which our Constitution commits us—all of us. . . .
>
> I do not desire to reorganize the lives of other people under the pretext of doing them good. . . .
>
> . . . Turn your hopes from this place on the Potomac as a source of livelihood. It is the most unproductive spot in these United States. . . . May your Federal Government no longer be condemned for what it plunders from some. And may it never have applause because of the loot it bestows on others.

In total contrast with the cacophony of presidential candidates who promise to violate moral principles and property rights on an indescribably vast scale, Leonard Read recognizes that "nothing is in the nation's capital except that which is taken from individuals."

That is why his *Pattern for Revolt*, though written decades ago, is both a bracing reminder of what has been lost and a motivation to reclaim it. It justifies attention from anyone who, "if given the opportunity, . . . would revolt against all of those political devices and ideas incidental to government in the role of master." And there is no better time to do so than now, when the price of lost liberty is large and candidates vie to further inflate that price as fast as possible, because the benefits of restoring liberty are also greater.

64.

Willing or Unwilling?

George Orwell, in his 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language," writes that "in our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible" (Orwell 1946). But perhaps even more insightful is his statement that "the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts."

Both statements apply no less to today's political situation. The current attacks on free markets, and liberty in general, whether from the media, the White House, or regulators everywhere, as well as presented solutions that involve government control, illustrate how the abuse of language has made foolish thoughts increasingly prevalent.

It is worth looking at how serious defenders of liberty dealt with the problem of linguistic misrepresentation in the past. Leonard Read, particularly in "Finding Words for Common Sense," from his 1969 book *The Coming Aristocracy* (Read 1969a), and "Saying What You Really Mean," from his 1967 book *Deeper than You Think* (Read 1967), expresses valuable insights into this problem.

The following passage is from "Finding Words for Common Sense":

> Teachers and students of liberty . . . are faced with a word problem: the language of liberty is strange to ears long attuned to the notions, clichés, plausibilities of statism, interventionism, socialism. . . .
>
> Assuming—as we do—that the ways of freedom make sense, ours then is the task of finding words for common sense. And I am unaware of any term that better illustrates our dilemma than "the free market." We have one concept in mind, but frequently a different idea comes through to the reader or hearer. The image that "free market" conjures up is rarely a faithful reproduction of the intention.
>
> . . . To understand our meaning, those aspects of the economy which have never been free must be imagined as free. And here is where we run into communication troubles: not many people can make the leap to imaginary situations; they can draw only on experience. This explains, in

part, why so many take our term, free market, to mean no more than private enterprise, as if the two were one and the same. The failure to make the distinction leads to ideological confusion and educational mischief. . . .

The free market is that which prevails when all exchanges are free of coercion; it is willing exchange only, that is, freedom in transactions.

But what, precisely, is coercion? . . . The free market's antithesis.

. . . Generally, coercion is thought of as force, with no distinction as to the kind of force. What we have in mind as the antithesis of the free market is *aggressive* force which can best be understood by contrasting it with *defensive* force. . . . Aggression is always an initiated action; defense is exclusively a secondary action, never coming into play except as a life-saving, rights-preserving, peace-keeping action. Aggression is a malignancy, antithetical to free market existence; defensive force, on the other hand—dormant until antagonized—is an ally and the armor of freedom.

When one can imagine a situation in which no aggressive force exists or, if it does, where it is promptly suppressed by defensive force, then one envisions creativity flowing freely and uninhibited from all citizens—the free market! With this ideal in mind, it is easy to observe the countless current practices that exemplify what the free market is not. . . .

Piracy is an enterprise and is definitely private. But observe that piracy's distinguishing feature is aggressive force. Now, as aggression lessens in any private operation the enterprise moves from the piratical state toward the ideal: the free market. . . . Being private is not the feature that controls the position of an enterprise on the piracy-free market spectrum. Aggressive force is the distinctive feature. Any enterprise, be it destructive or constructive, can be and often is private. Thus, the mere fact that an enterprise is privately initiated lends it no special virtue, economic or otherwise. . . .

. . . Indeed, where the aggressive forces are dominant, private enterprises may be as far from free market in their operation as is the TVA or the Post Office!

> The free market can properly function only as aggressive force is diminished. Government, theoretically at least, is society's agency of defense, its role being to rid society of aggressive force in its numerous manifestations: fraud, violence, predation, misrepresentation. Yet, today, government itself is by far the outstanding practitioner of aggressive force: for instance, the forcible extortion of your income and mine. . . .
>
> A compelling reason for this reversed role of government—aggression rather than defense—is that countless minorities and localities insist upon special privileges, that is, the gratification of their wishes at the expense of others. This type of gratification is attainable only by aggressive force. While nearly everyone can see the fallacy of this as a way of life when indulged in by others, very few can imagine getting along without their own special privilege. Aggressive force, they concede, is wrong—except in *our* case; *we* couldn't get along without it!

In "Saying What You Really Mean," Read makes the distinction between aggressive force and defensive force, without which coercion cannot be adequately understood. He proposes an alternative to words like "capitalism" and "free markets" not so tainted by confusion and misrepresentation. He argues that the contrast between liberty and government domination (even when it is disguised as freedom) can be recognized more clearly by focusing on whether arrangements involve willing exchange or unwilling exchange.

> [There are] a babel of nondefinitive classifications [for politico-economic beliefs]. . . . Most . . . labels are meaningless and utterly confusing unless one is aware of the author's thinking, motivations, prejudices, predilections; they're no aid to clarity.
>
> . . . We are at the mercy of definers, few of whom agree. . . .
>
> . . . Recognize how deeply exchange extends into human affairs. It goes to the very roots of and is fundamental to earthly existence. . . . Specialists exchange—or perish! . . .
>
> . . . Shall it be willing or unwilling exchange?

. . . Standing for willing exchange, on the one hand, or for unwilling exchange, on the other, more nearly accents our ideological differences than does the employment of the terms in common usage. . . . There is a minimum of verbal façade to hide behind.

Willing exchange . . . has not yet been saddled with emotional connotations. . . . Further, [as for] its antithesis, unwilling exchange, . . . no one, not even a protagonist, proudly acknowledges he favors that; it does offense to his idealism. . . .

If we cut through all the verbiage used to report and analyze political and economic controversy over the centuries, we find that much of it boils down to a denial of willing and the insistence upon unwilling exchange. . . .

It is not necessary to draw on ancient history for examples of unwilling exchange. . . . The list of coercive activities that go beyond the principled scope of government runs into the thousands. . . .

Unwilling exchange has its genesis . . . in the forcible imposition on the individual of a value standard not of his choice but of someone else's making. . . . Throughout the ages, right up to the present moment, unwilling exchange has been conspicuous. . . .

. . . The concept of willing exchange unseats Napoleonic behavior—all forms of authoritarianism—and enthrones the individual. The consumer becomes king. Individual freedom of choice rules economic affairs. . . . [It] is for me, and a willing seller, to decide; it is no one else's business! In good theory this is true; in practice it faces opposition.

. . . Very few will accord that liberty to others which they personally cherish so much. . . .

. . . A good society . . . [requires] the unobstructed flow of creativities . . . in free and willing exchange.

. . . The good society is a manifestation, not of a predesigned blueprint—not of a mass blindly following some person's scheme of organization—but, rather . . . a configuration of the tiny wisdoms men come upon when seeking, above all else, what is right and righteous . . . the unobstructed flow of millions of individually acquired

wisdoms, that is, flashes of enlightenment in free and willing exchange.

No man set about inventing willing exchange. Instead, some men were in pursuit of Truth. Their numerous findings and insights combined to make of them the kind of men who understood the advantages of willing or free exchange. But whenever the pursuit of Truth has not been uppermost among the aims of a considerable number of people, the understanding recedes to the point where unwilling exchange is believed in and practiced.

No man preconceived and set about designing and writing the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights as a means of erecting a good society. These political documents were really a configuration of beliefs that achieved dominance through a pursuit of Truth quite extraordinary in its intensity. The seeking of Truth was the seed; a good society, perhaps the best that has existed was the bloom; these documents were but a recording of the beliefs. To confirm this, merely note that when the beliefs changed, the documents became commensurately meaningless.

When we entertain the idea that political documents and laws cause a good society, we are wont, in adversity, to repair and revise the documents and laws. This is not only useless but seriously diverting. For nothing counts but Truth, and Truth comes to us only when we are seeking what is right and righteous. This, to my way of thinking, is the most important and practical of all political facts.

. . . I believe that no person, or any combination of persons, regardless of numbers, or any agency they may contrive . . . has any right of control over any other person that does not exist or inhere as a moral right in each individual. The only moral right of control by one individual over another or others is a defensive right, that is, the right to fend off aggressive or destructive actions. Governments, therefore, should go no further in controlling people than the individuals who organize it have a moral right to go. For, if government does not obtain its power of control from those who establish it, from where then does its power derive? In short, limit governmental power

> to codifying the do-nots consonant with the defense of life and livelihood, to the protection of all citizens equally. No special privilege for anyone!
>
> This is to say that, ideally, government should be limited to inhibiting and penalizing all violence, fraud, predation, misrepresentation—that is, to keeping the peace. Insist that it tolerate no unwilling exchange and that it never indulge in what it is organized to prohibit. Let government do only this; leave all else, including welfare and prosperity, to willing exchange.

One of the difficulties of defending liberty has always been that those who wish to restrict it hide what is involved behind linguistic smokescreens. The malleability of language allows new versions of the same old statism to masquerade as "new and improved" versions of the good society.

Linguistic misdirection makes foolish thoughts about social organization more politically palatable while making it harder to communicate the benefits that are only achievable through liberty. But Read knows that liberty is so superior to any possible alternative that it can turn back the tide of foolishness if what it entails—and what its absence entails—can be made clear enough.

Read's focus on voluntary exchange backed solely by defensive force can help cut through the tangle of verbal confusion and distortion about social organization. After all, at the root of virtually every complaint about capitalism or markets is a claim that it harms someone in an unjustified way (i.e., it violates some right). If people can see that a system of solely voluntary exchange does not violate anyone's rights and only harms those who wish to gain some government-backed privilege that amounts to piracy at the expense of others, then such claims will be quickly dismissed rather than given credence.

Leonard Read spent most of his life trying to communicate, against a tide of attacks and misrepresentations, the miracles that occur when people are left free to arrange their affairs voluntarily. That tide has only grown, but Read's careful thinking and insights can aid those still engaged in rhetorical combat with the many promoters of the nonsense of statism.

65.

Are Businesses Entitled to a Fair Profit?

In my experience of public-policy discussions, one of the weasel words most frequently played as a trump card is "fair."

Like "need," which plays a similar role, fairness does not have a clear meaning and thereby provides a lot of room for equivocation, which is almost always used to justify forcing some Americans to pay for what someone else wants.

Fairness has no universal meaning beyond "more for me or those I care about" or "I want, but I do not want to pay for." I learned this lesson decades ago from my children, who wielded the word to advance their narrow self-interests. When my daughter complained about having more responsibility—she was the oldest—she didn't mention her bigger allowance. My son complained that his smaller allowance was "unfair" but didn't mention that he had fewer responsibilities.

Claims of fairness imply agreement on what fairness means both in principle and in practice, but fairness is in the eye of the beholder and varies dramatically from person to person. Judging from common usage, charges of unfairness are mainly the rhetorical garnish necessary to justify using political coercion to plunder those who have a different view of fairness.

Leonard Read understood what so many today fail to understand about market fairness. One of his clearest discussions on this matter is in his essay "Business Is Entitled to a Fair Profit" (Read 1962a).

> The notion that a business is entitled to a fair profit has no more to commend it than does the claim that workers are entitled to a fair wage, capitalists to a fair rate of interest, stockholders to a fair dividend, landlords to a fair rent, farmers to a fair price for their produce. Profit (or loss), regardless of how big, cannot properly be defined as fair or unfair.
>
> To demonstrate why *fair* should not be used to modify *profit* as a right to which someone is entitled, merely imagine a businessman, heedless of the market, persisting in making buggy whips. If no one were willing to exchange dollars for whips, the manufacturer would fail. . . . Would

> you have any feeling of guilt or unfairness for having refused to buy his whips? Most certainly not!

Profit is the residual derived from willing customers after costs have been met. Consumers who use their own money to associate with any supplier under any terms they choose do not deny the rights or claims of disappointed suppliers.

> We do not think of ourselves as unfair when we search for bargains. We have no sense of unfairness when employing a competent rather than an incompetent helper, or borrowing money at the lowest rate offered, or paying a low rather than a high rental. . . . When we shop around, our choices cause profits to accrue to some businesses, losses to others. We do not relate these exercises to fairness or unfairness or consider that anyone's rights have been infringed.
>
> . . . There is no such thing as a right to a "fair" profit. All that any person is entitled to in the market place, whether a business proprietor or wage earner, is what others will offer in willing exchange.

So, as with other weasel words, we should ask why people so commonly resort to unfounded claims about "unfairness." The answer lies in government's coercive power and the true unfairness it can impose on others.

> When it is claimed that business is entitled to a fair or reasonable profit, the claimers must have something else in mind than what they can obtain through willing exchange. Otherwise, they wouldn't mention the matter.
>
> . . . The "something else" . . . must necessarily mean something other than individual freedom of choice. In short, it must mean the only alternative to freedom of choice: authoritarianism. When the market—freedom in exchange—is cast aside, there remains but one other determinant as to who will get how much of what, namely, government! And when government determines or controls profits, prices, wages, rents and other aspects of production and exchange, we have socialism. . . .
>
> When fairness is demanded as a substitute for what can be obtained in willing exchange, the asker, consciously or not, is insisting on what naturally and logically follows:

> a planned economy. . . . These measures—socialism—are government's only means of "fairness."

How does addressing asserted unfairness cause unfairness?

> The declaration that business is entitled to a fair profit connotes equalitarianism; that is, a coerced evenness in reward to the competent and incompetent alike. . . .
>
> Assuming the market is free from fraud, violence, misrepresentation, and predation, the economic failure or success of any individual is measured by what he can exchange in willing exchange—fairness being a state of affairs that is presupposed in the assumption. Everyone, according to any moral code I would respect, is entitled to fairness in the sense of no special privilege to anyone and open opportunity for all; no one is entitled to what is implied by a fair price, a fair wage, a fair salary, a fair rent, or a fair profit. In market terms, one is entitled to what others will offer in willing exchange. That is all!

As Read wrote in his 1948 book *Pattern for Revolt*, "Given freedom of opportunity, protection from fraud, violence and predation, and a dependence for our welfare on our own initiative, we can and will look out for ourselves better than will any other person or any government agency" (Read 1948). In other words, protecting what should be our inalienable self-ownership is fair to all; violating it is unfair to all but tyrants.

66.

The Coming Renaissance

In "The Coming Renaissance" (Read 1961a), from *Essays on Liberty*, published in 1961, Leonard Read describes a coming renaissance in freedom that has been lost to slavery. Today, when "renaissance" is hardly the word to describe the state of American freedom, Read's essay is worth our consideration. "A renaissance suggests something that once existed, was lost, and is being born again. The thing I have in mind is freedom. We once had it in good measure but have lost it to slavery. . . . Seems incredible, but it is so! Our drift into slavery has been so gradual that it is almost impossible to discern short of rigorous analysis."

Why does Read assert that the United States has lost freedom in what he calls "our drift into slavery"?

> Whoever controls a good or a service is the owner of that good or service. Ownership, in any genuine sense, is an empty term without control. . . .
>
> . . . Whoever controls an individual's actions can be described as the owner of that individual. To the extent that a person is under the arbitrary control of another or others, to that extent is the person a slave.
>
> Slavery—man-control of man—has its roots in antiquity . . . extending itself into modern times. The framers of the American government-a political arrangement more consistent with freedom than any other ever devised—ignored their own revolutionary idea that men derive their right to life from their Creator, when, in the Constitution, they failed to challenge the institution of slavery.

But don't we all know that slavery in America ended long ago?

> Most Americans harbor the false notion that we did away with slavery when we "freed the slaves" . . . as if that act—proper and long overdue—rooted out the evil. *It left the real problem untouched*.
>
> The institution of slavery is only incidentally a color problem; definitively, it is the practice of the coercive inclinations of man to rule his fellow men. It is the tendency

> in many of us to play God, to lord it over others, to force compliance to our own wills. . . .
>
> This tendency to man-mastery, . . . over the actions of others, is strong. . . . Yet, this vestige of uncivilized man is relatively harmless so long as individuals with these despotic inclinations cannot compel others to join them in their designs. . . .
>
> But when [someone] . . . obtains the backing of the State in order to control the life and life substance of others—either to feather his own nest or to gratify his compassionate instincts—then every person in the nation suffers as a consequence. His more or less harmless individual barbarity will turn to effective collective despotism.

How does Read illustrate the striking idea that "more or less harmless individual barbarity" is turned into "collective despotism" via government?

> If a person wanted the rest of us to help pay for his power and light, but had no means of compulsion at his disposal, quite likely his wish would go ungratified. But give him and a few of his like-minded friends the police power of government, the power to force a nation of people to do their bidding, and we get ourselves a TVA. . . . Remove this compulsive force, and TVA, as a formal, legal agency to subsidize some at the expense of all, would automatically terminate.
>
> The compulsion observed in TVA is no isolated instance. Rather, the same compulsive principle that makes TVA a reality is part and parcel of national polity. Compulsive political management, not competitive private enterprise, is now the way to characterize the American economic system. We must not lose sight of the fact that our present system is founded on compulsion, and that this compulsive power has been captured by those whose object is to make everyone else behave *their* way. This is slavery pure and simple—if slavery be defined as the coercive imposition of someone's will upon others as relating to productive and creative actions.

Once the government has the power to enslave people, the resources extracted from slavery are put up for sale to advance the interests of those

in government who have power. In the process, all of us suffer from a loss of freedom.

> Once this compulsive power is used by those in government beyond the inhibitive, restrictive, punitive functions; once it is permitted to spill over into a control of creative actions, then this "spillage" will be put on sale in the political market. Businessmen will vie for it to minimize competition; farmers will seize upon it as a means of gaining wealth without producing; labor unions will obtain a large share of it to enforce unwilling exchange. This "spillage" is now employed throughout the whole economy; it *is* the system! Frederic Bastiat referred to this as "spoliation." . . .
>
> To the extent that this compulsive force controls the productive and creative actions of a person, to that extent is the person enslaved. Further, to the extent that this force exerts itself over the productivity and creativity of the American community, to that extent does the institution of slavery exist in this land. Nor does it matter whether the force is exerted directly by government or indirectly by labor unions, businessmen, farmers, or others. . . .
>
> Let this compulsive force get out of hand—as is now the case—and it becomes nearly impossible to put down. It feeds on itself. . . . Having no more power to limit itself than has a runaway truck, it must, eventually, destroy the society on which it has parasitically fastened itself, for it only saps its victims—never strengthens them. This compulsive force will destroy the society in which it is set loose short of one eventuality: *a voluntary revolution*.

How can a voluntary revolution take place when people don't recognize the partial slavery that has come to exist almost everywhere?

> This voluntary revolution can have its locus only in individuals. It is the distinctly personal accomplishment of overcoming any desire to interfere in any way with the creative actions of any other person. . . . It is the realization that others, as well as oneself, are accountable to their Creator, not to any self-appointed human substitute. In short, it is the elimination of the dictator complex from the human soul. The voluntary revolution is to forgo the childish drive to

> coerce and to rely instead on voluntary action. The urge to compel is a trace of barbarism; the mastery of the voluntary attitude is a distinguishing mark of civilized man.

Is a voluntary revolution "too slow," or is it the only way toward a renaissance of liberty?

> Some . . . will contend that the civilizing process is too slow. . . . This contention is not valid. This voluntary process, being the only means at our disposal, is thus the fastest one there is. . . .
>
> This doubt is itself but a vestige of the slavery complex—the lack of faith in what others can accomplish as self-controlling individuals—and should be put down. The only positive influence one can have on others in this respect is one's own exemplary behavior: *Any right action . . . sets enormous forces of emulation in motion*. This influence is possible only as there is a concentration on the perfecting of self which, of course, requires that there not be a concentration on the intellectual and spiritual shortcomings of others. Only where there is insight is there ingathering.
>
> Every forward step in civilization has been brought about by this ingathering influence initiated, in each instance, by an individual. . . .
>
> Let each individual do his best to gain and practice this voluntary attitude and, at the same time, have an abiding faith that this is the means to bring about the voluntary revolution; let you and me do this and we can confidently count on. the coming renaissance—a rebirth of freedom.

67.

The Love of Liberty and the Limitation of Government

Can you defend what you do not understand? Sometimes. For instance, to do his job, a soldier does not need to completely understand why his side is fighting. But when it comes to liberty, understanding it is a prerequisite for effectively protecting it. Leonard Read makes that case in "The Love of Liberty," from his 1975 book of the same name (Read 1975b).

> Is there knowledge of what liberty is? On the part of a few, yes; the multitude, no! . . . For the most part, . . . [we] bow to the shadow while trampling the very substance of liberty.

Our misunderstanding of liberty largely arises from misunderstanding government and the role it must play to be consistent with liberty. If we fail to recognize this clearly, it is possible to accept a rhetoric of liberty and not see how it undermines the reality of liberty.

What advantages ensue from organizing people and resources via government rather than voluntarily? This is important to ask because government has no resources except what it commandeers from citizens. And if government organization does not create more resources than there would be in its absence, then the only way it can advance the general welfare—that is, both your welfare and mine rather than yours at my expense—is to make more efficient use of existing resources. So, where does government have a comparative advantage over other organizations, and what does that imply?

> One cannot intelligently decide what government should and should not do unless one knows what government is and is not. What is government? I take my cue from Woodrow Wilson: 'Government, in the last analysis, is organized force.' In essence, it is a series of edicts backed by a constabulary—a physical force. Obey, or take the consequences! Let's symbolize this physical force by the clenched fist. Find out what the fist can and cannot do and you will know what government should and should not do, not necessarily what it will and will not do.

In other words, since the arrangements citizens can make must be mutually agreed to, government's only comparative advantage relative to its citizens is in the use of coercion. But when does government's ability to coerce improve the well-being of its citizens? Most people would not consider themselves better off if they were told how to dress, what to eat, where to live, or what job to work and how long to work it. (Of course, they may find it advantageous to be in a position to choose such things for others.)

To make better sense of this, Read uses an analogy to a fist. When you make a fist, what can you do more effectively than before? Not much. With your hands in fists, you can't type a magnum opus, perform award-winning music, paint the *Mona Lisa*, manufacture goods and services, or shake hands, among many other things. But fists can allow you to enforce more effectively your decisions on those who would choose differently—that is, to coerce others better.

> What can the fist do? It can inhibit, restrain, prohibit, penalize. What, in all good conscience, should be restrained and penalized? The answer is to be found in the moral codes: fraud, violence, misrepresentations, stealing, predations, killing, that is, all destructive activities.
>
> What can the fist, this physical force, not do? It cannot create. The creative force, in all instances, is a spiritual rather than a physical force, in the sense that discoveries, inventions, insights, intuitive flashes are spiritual. Everything by which we live has its origin in the spiritual before it shows forth in the material. . . .
>
> So, how do I draw the line between what government should and should not do? I would have government *limited* to inhibiting and penalizing the destructive actions; leave all creative activities—without exception . . . —to citizens acting freely, cooperatively, competitively, voluntarily, privately.

We all gain from government's fist when it is used to restrain destructive acts and thereby expand our ability to create and cooperate with one another. But that fist does not expand the creative ideas and innovations that advance the quantity and quality of goods and services. As government expands its actions beyond the restraint of destructive acts, it intrudes into and thereby contracts its citizens' scope for creative actions. Fewer ideas will be imagined and implemented; our creative and cooperative endeavors, on

which the general welfare is built, will be reduced; and liberty, not only a means to a valuable end but also an extremely valuable end in itself, will be reduced along with our creative efforts.

> Is it liberty if no one is free to act creatively as he pleases? If politicians and bureaucrats are dictating what everyone may and may not produce and exchange, and at what prices? . . .
>
> . . . The dominating influence . . . is ignorance parading as infinite wisdom. [Some] proclaim that they can run our lives better than we can. . . .
>
> Liberty is impossible in such a situation. . . .
>
> . . . Everyone loves liberty. Were we to know what it is, aware of the social structure in which it thrives, and willing to pay the price, it is liberty we would have. . . .
>
> . . . Liberty is *freedom of choice*. Everyone loves freedom of choice for himself, if not for others. . . .
>
> If there be anyone who does not favor freedom of choice as much as I do, that person is unknown to me.

When government grows beyond its one comparative advantage of punishing destructive behavior, both our liberty and our jointly productive activities suffer. But why doesn't this negative consequence lead people to resist the expansion? As government's fist expands beyond its legitimate role and its payoff increases, more people who want to dictate to others—dictocrats, in Read's terminology—enter the political arena. As government does worse by its citizens, "the worst get on top," in Friedrich Hayek's famous line from *The Road to Serfdom* (Hayek 1944).

> While everyone loves liberty for self, there are ever so many who are unwilling to accord freedom of choice to others. Merely take note of those who favor and endorse wage and price controls, privileges, supports, subsidies, tariffs, quotas, embargoes, the coercive taking from some and giving to others, restrictions on competition; indeed, all deviations from the free market, private ownership, limited government way of life. Note these, and one will have a fair estimate of the number of those who love liberty for self but not for others. They love liberty but *they live license*.
>
> Thus, the love of liberty for self and not for others is but a selfish, greedy, and unattainable dream.

The one-sided liberty by which some expand their freedom to dictate to others is inconsistent with an inalienable right to liberty (and justice) for all. Domination enforced by government coercion expands along with government; therefore, to reverse such domination involves restricting government to its sole defensible role as defender against destructive actions, essentially extending the golden rule to government as well as citizens.

> Do not to others [even via government] that which you would not have them do unto you. Or, in this context, expect not from others that which you will not happily, graciously, intelligently accord to them! This is how the lovers of liberty may experience what they love. There is no other way.

68.

The Case against Name-Calling

John Miltimore (2018) writes, "There are a great many logical fallacies we see in modern discourse. But of all fallacies, the ad hominem is king (and probably always will be)." Further, "the ad hominem has found particular prominence in the current age, which combines plummeting intelligence with instantaneous, character-limited communication. (A toxic mixture, indeed.)"

As someone who teaches many public-policy issues, my students and I frequently encounter these fallacies—arguments that attack the person rather than the argument. For instance, I explicitly make a point of saying that bad people can be right in an argument and good people can be wrong. I also note that while I do sometimes come to an ad hominem conclusion about someone involved in public policy, I do not make ad hominem arguments. I also teach students to raise their level of scrutiny when reading an argument by looking for such red flags, especially ad hominem fallacies found in the very first argument (given that authors usually consider this to be their most powerful argument).

My teaching and interest in the use of such arguments explains why I found Leonard Read's "The Case against Name Calling" (Read 1964b), from the July 1964 *Notes from FEE*, of great interest. I believe it is worth anyone's serious consideration.

> Those individuals who urge the force of government to carry out their claim to 'a fair share' of your income are inclined to resent any and all opposition. They hurl such terms as 'extremists'—with disparaging overtones—at those who dissent from their designs. These people who would communalize the product of all by coercion tend to smear their opponents. Name calling is part and parcel of their make-up.

When a policy gives benefits to one group and takes them away from others, most of us think it is unfair because those who enact the policy are supposed to serve the public rather than take from them. It becomes tempting to demonize these public servants to alleviate one's qualms.

> Name calling, however, is an unconquered tendency of many who should know better. Individuals who put their faith in freedom and who, by practice and discipline, have learned how to live by their precepts are sometimes stirred to anger, disgust, contempt, discouragement—yes, to name calling—when they see others violating the principles of simple justice which they hold to be proper. . . . [But] name calling is not simply noncorrective: it actually hardens the 'so-and-so's' in their sins. . . . Is there a way, then, rationally, to avoid this . . . distemper?

In other words, those who believe in liberty should be better than coercionists. After all, libertarians do not want to "win" the ability to violate others' rights to benefit their own special-interest group. We want to win, against a deluge of ad mercatus (against the market) assertions, their willingness to open their minds and hearts to everyone's equal rights and the miracles that freedom can erect on that foundation.

Read follows up with an analogy to those who are color-blind or have less ability to detect various scents: we "hurl no invective" at them. Read argues that the "relative underdevelopment" of someone's moral nature (which should consist of "an abstract sense of right and wrong, the enlightened concession that others have as much right to life, livelihood, liberty as one's self, appreciation of the beautiful, awe, reverence, sense of duty or responsibility, sympathy, compassion, faith") should not be attacked with name-calling either.

> While nearly everyone in so-called higher civilizations will agree that the Golden Rule is a good maxim, only now and again can a person be found who has a sense of justice adequate to its daily practice. Merely reflect on . . . "leaders" who call on the police powers of government for forcibly take from some that theory own compassions may be satisfied. Tax money represents money taken, not money given, and its forcible redistribution feathers the nests of some at the expense of others. No intelligent sense of nonretributive justice here! Many people have not as yet acquired this new faculty: a false philanthropy is the result.
>
> . . . Careful reflection will reveal that it is a missing or poorly developed sense of justice in others which infuriates so many of us [libertarians] and evokes our disparagements

> and name calling. But observe how irrational is the distemper on our part. . . . Indeed, when we find ourselves name calling, we are staking out the meager dimensions of this rare, elusive, and as yet, evanescent faculty in ourselves.

If the goal is to persuade people to think honestly and deeply about our rights and the wonders achievable by "anything that's peaceful"—as a superior alternative to using force to get what they want at others' expense—then name-calling is not only irrational but also highly counterproductive.

> While [name-calling] "lets off steam," it has its origin in a soul-searing force. The cause of freedom would be better served were silence to take its place; this damaging tactic on the part of any antisocialist discredits everyone who is on the freedom side of the argument; it creates a mean, irrational *reaction* because name calling is a mean, irrational *action*.
>
> . . . A sense of justice rests partly, as does the moral nature, on rationality, on man's ability to will his own attitudes and behavior. . . . Man's creativity in this respect can be helped along by preparing a climate conducive to its growth. Is it not self-evident that this preparation consists of discovering truth and how to present it and of detecting false ideas and how to expose them? Of relying on reason, persuasion and example?
>
> And, is it not . . . folly to become angry at color blindness, taste dullness, a decrepit moral nature, or an arrested sense of justice? *Each is but an undeveloped faculty*. Denouncing a person because of an unacquired faculty—regardless of which one—is no more rational than damning oneself because of not being perfect in all respects.

Leonard Read came to a similar conclusion against name-calling earlier that same year in "Liberated!" (Read 1962d), published in the March 1962 *Notes from FEE*.

> It is interesting to reflect on the preliberation notions. . . . Lying at their root [is] the primitive doctrine that man derives his rights to life and liberty from some man-concocted collective—the tribe or the state. . . .
>
> When an individual is liberated, he becomes aware of the miracles which come to pass once creative human

> energy has no organized, man-concocted force standing against it. An unwavering faith in free men expels any lingering, misplaced confidence in little men playing god.
>
> The omnipotent state—authoritarianism—will not be liquidated except by liberated individuals. It is only they who go in search of freedom's answers. . . . Only liberated individuals can be of any help in reversing the trend away from freedom. . . .
>
> . . . The individual not yet liberated is no more educable as to the free market, private property, limited government philosophy than you or I are educable on subjects in which we have no interest. Thus it is patently absurd to scold or rant at them, to be impatient, to regard them as not bright, to try poking our ideas down their necks. Such tactics will only send them scurrying.

Leonard Read recognizes what is often forgotten about political battles in which one side tries to force its will on the other: ad hominem arguments are fallacies, but as long as they convince people to vote your way, they will persist in politics and can even be the centerpiece. But campaigning for freedom from all coercers means attracting rather than attacking people. That is a much higher standard to meet, but aren't devotees of liberty trying to advance a higher standard of human conduct toward one another?

69.

Worrycrats

Outside of the D.C. Beltway, state capitols, and city halls, bureaucrats don't exactly receive adulation from citizens. Libertarians often lead the chorus of criticism. But some bureau employees are necessary. Leonard Read discusses this in "The Worrycrats," from his 1972 book *To Free or Freeze* (Read 1972a). "Even when government is limited to codifying the taboos, invoking a common justice, and keeping the peace, there is . . . an operating staff: a bureaucracy." In other words, even a nation of "laws and not men" needs some people to enforce what laws there are, even though their incentives will be far worse in their bureaucratic roles than in their private relationships. (This is why America's founders were so keen on carefully monitoring their behavior.)

Despite the need for bureaucrats to defend legitimate laws, some of them clearly deserve our mistrust. Read called them worrycrats.

> Worrycrats . . . are a special breed of totalitarian bureaucrats who spawn rapidly as society is socialized. These people concern themselves with our health, education, welfare, auto safety, drug intake, diet, and what have you. Worrycrats today outnumber any other professionals in history, so rapidly have they proliferated.

Why should we mistrust them?

> The activities of these worrycrats in no way resemble a free market operation. Freedom in transactions has no part in this political procedure. Citizens are coerced to pay these professional worriers whether they want their services or not. A nongovernmental operation of similar nature would be called a racket. . . . I question the propriety of our being coerced to pay worrycrats to worry about us. We worry enough on our own without paying to have our worries multiplied.

What is the evidence for the existence of these bureaucrats who want us to worry more?

> Observe the massive outpourings of the worrycrats—over TV, radio, and in the press—about lung cancer, heart failure, mercury, cranberries, cyclomates, seat belts, groceries, and so on. Unless one sees through all of these unsolicited oral and verbal counsels, he is going to be unnecessarily concerned . . . ordinary fears and worries substantially multiplied. . . . Fear and worry are far deadlier menaces than all the things from which the worrycrats pretend to protect us.

How do worrycrats worry more effectively on our behalf than we do? They have a know-it-all sense of overconfidence and ignore huge differences among individuals.

> Are these political saviors really concerned about your welfare and mine? Actually, they do not know that you or I exist. . . . [What do] they know about what is good or bad for me?
>
> What is their competence? . . . They are not experts when it comes to your welfare or mine. . . .
>
> . . . Suppose that these worrycrats are the world's most advanced physicians and scientists. Would they know enough of what is injurious or helpful to you or me to justify forcing this information upon us or frightening us about it? . . .
>
> . . . Individuals vary widely. . . .
>
> . . . There is no average person! . . .
>
> I care not who sits behind the worrycrat desk. . . . Prescribing for and presiding over 200 million distinctive, unique individuals is no more within man's competence than . . . directing the Universe. Contrary to socialist doctrine, we are discrete beings—not a mass, a collective.

In fact, those worrying on our behalf may be undermining our health and well-being.

> [There are] many illustrations of how death is hastened through fears, anxieties, rage, worries. . . . The outpourings of the worrycrats tend to multiply our stresses, anxieties, worries . . . literally scaring us to death.

That does not mean there is no role for government with regard to our health, but the role should not be multiple times greater than it is in other areas of the economy.

> Ideally, there is a role for government with respect to health, education, welfare. That role is to inhibit misrepresentation, fraud, violence, predation, whether by doctors . . . or others. No false labels! No coercive impositions on anyone! . . . All of us should be prohibited from injuring others. Actions that harm others—not what one does to self—define the limits of the social problem and of governmental scope.

Americans are now confronted with an even vaster crazy quilt of federal executive agencies, mandates, regulations, and czars. Those bureaucracies house phalanxes of worrycrats who inhibit choices that individuals and groups would take in search of their own growth, fulfillment, and well-being. They infringe on our right to choose how to live our lives.

Worrycrats interfere with individual choices and mutual agreements that carry risk. They try to scare us into "voluntary" compliance with what they decide is good for everyone despite the huge variance in preferences, circumstances, and health histories among us. Failing that, they move to forcibly override what we would choose because, while they may not know us at all, supposedly they "know better."

It is not hard to see how such do-gooder regulations harm our economic health. What if mining, logging, or cab driving was restricted for being "too risky"? Since police and fire personnel and healthcare providers are exposed to elevated risks, should we ban their jobs? The answers to these questions are obvious. Even though some professions are riskier than others, there is no justification for overriding the choices adults make to bear those risks.

Restrictions and impositions can impose greater risks in other areas. Because traffic-calming policies, for example, can slow emergency vehicle response time, they may cause more deaths than they prevent. "Green" policies, for a whole set of examples, increase other forms of pollution and environmental hazards: wind farms must dispose of blades and produce massive carbon emissions to acquire cement; battery backup systems and electric vehicle mandates generate emissions in the extraction of cobalt and rare earth metals; and stopping oil pipeline projects moves oil transportation into trucks that produce far more pollution and come with a greater risk of environmental harm. Food and Drug Administration regulations

that delay life-saving drugs in the name of safety fall under the same category as these examples, as do efforts to force energy costs upward, which reduces resources to improve our health.

Worrycrats, according to Read, practice chicanery. It is striking how much the scope of their chicanery has expanded since the time of his essay. Many people have begun to see this for themselves due to the multiple forms of malfeasance that covid provided cover for, including a notable increase in coercion and violations of individual rights (e.g., mask mandates and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's unconstitutional ban on evictions). Read ends his article with a good reminder for those thinking about such issues today:

> You know yourself better than anyone else does. Better that you turn yourself toward what you think is your advantage than be turned by a worrycrat toward what he thinks is your advantage. You at least know something, whereas he knows nothing of you as an individual.

70.

Common Justice, Not Equality

Most people agree that "equality" is a good thing because it is the socially acceptable thing to say. But to think that equality is always good and worth pursuing is to ignore important issues.

Some forms of equality are inconsistent with others. One form of equality may not necessarily be good, because it may crowd out a more important form, which is the case when equality of results is used to justify inequality of treatment. Some inequalities are sources of crucial social benefits, such as the massive gains from the differences in people's abilities that are coordinated through voluntary market arrangements.

Leonard Read thinks through such issues and comes to some important but unfortunately out of the mainstream conclusions in "Inequality Enshrined," from his 1974 book *Having My Way* (Read 1974). Especially for those dedicated to liberty, it is worth considering his thoughts.

> Books, speeches, expressed yearnings—past and present—have much to say in favor of equality, and they promote a demand for it. We are equal in the eyes of God, they say; we are equal before the law; we are born equal, have equal rights, are entitled to equal pay, on and on. While numerous philosophers and statesmen have recognized how all-pervading inequality is, few have enshrined it, that is, portrayed inequality as a highly desirable state of affairs. Inequality exists, unfortunately! I have just had a change of mind: inequality exists, *fortunately*! . . .
>
> We have here a semantic trap. . . . Once we accept the idea that all men are equal before God, we are more than likely to think of equality as the major purpose of human effort and a condition to be sought, as nearly as possible, in all worldly relationships. This is a dangerous notion, completely at odds with reality.
>
> As I now see it, men are no more equal before God than they are equal in this earthly life. Judas was not the equal of Peter!. . . . What this affirmation is intended to convey, really, is that all men are subject to the Universal

Laws *indiscriminately; there are no favorites; there is a common across-the board justice*. With this in mind, merely reflect on the distinction between common justice and equality. They are by no means synonymous.

Inequality prevails among men. . . .

As F.A. Hayek concludes in *The Constitution of Liberty*:

> From the fact that people are very different it follows that, if we treat them equally, the result must be inequality in their actual position, and that the only way to place them in an equal position would be to treat them differently. Equality before the law and material equality are therefore not only different but are in conflict with each other; and we can achieve either the one or the other, but not both at the same time.

The ideal civil law, like the laws of God or Natural Law, is unbiased as to who or what we are. But we are not equal in the "eyes" of the civil law any more than we are equal in the "eyes" of the Ten Commandments. These laws are blind; they have no eyes to see us. Civil laws, as the Universal Laws—if intelligently drawn—are indiscriminate; they confer no special privilege on anyone; they are but codes—blind to the thousand and one ways we rank ourselves—their hallmark being a common justice.

If we wish to say that these codes are equally as fair to you as to me, all well and good. This kind of wording, however, merely asserts that we are—one as much as another—beneficiaries of fairness and justice. By employing the right words, we avoid the notion of human equality and the mischievous deductions that grow from such a common, semantic error. . . .

What about the popular claim that we are born equal? We are no more equal at birth than at death. . . .

We have equal rights! Valid? In a way, provided "rights" are properly defined and circumscribed. Any person, regardless of race, creed, color, or whatever, has as much right to life, livelihood, liberty as any other—provided his actions are peaceful, that is, noncoercive. Observe that when thus circumscribed, the equal rights concept makes

no claim on any other person; it is, instead, *an appeal to reason, morality, justice*. . . . It is righteous and, for this reason, utterly harmless.

I stress "harmless" simply because most people put no such boundaries on "equal rights." Blind to the rational limitations of this concept, they are carried away with "equality" and demand equal pay, rights to a job, to "a decent standard of living," to a "fair" wage or price. They put quotas, embargoes, tariffs on goods, meaning that they think of themselves as having a right to your and my trade. It is impossible to list the instances in which people have slumped so far in their thinking that, today, mere wishes are thought of as rights.

Take note of the fact that all of these demands for equality, beyond the rational boundary, make a claim on others. No longer harmless, they are harmful, destructive. They rob selected Peter to pay collective Paul—feathering the nests of some at the expense of others. Noncoercive? To the contrary, each and every one of these rests on raw coercion—the application of police force. . . .

The notion of equality is one of the mistaken features of our folklore, but so much lip service is given to it that the thought of inequality as a desirable condition is, at first blush, shocking. How could any sane person favor inequality! Is it because he has no compassion, no thought for his fellow men? To the contrary, I would argue. . . .

Likeness? Equality? Let us be done with this careless phrasing—this abuse of word—and the destructive thoughts to which it leads!

"Free and equal" is an oft-heard expression, suggesting that freedom and equality are as inseparable as Siamese twins. Actually, they are mutually antagonistic. The equality idea—equal pay and so on—rests on the antithesis of freedom: raw coercion. It is just as impossible to be free when equality is politically manipulated as it is impossible to be equal.

Free and unequal—freedom and inequality—are what go hand in hand. The essence of individuality is uniqueness: inequality in skills, talents, knowledge, aspirations.

This is merely an acknowledgment of a Universal Law. Obviously, we must be free to produce, to exchange, to travel or we perish as surely as if all were like you or me or Socrates.

We come, finally, to the economic case for inequality. Not our likenesses, but our differences, give rise to the division of labor and the complex market processes of production and trade. We have already mentioned, and can see all about us, that in a given field of activity one person is more skilled—more productive—than another. So, it is to our advantage to specialize and to trade with other specialists.

. . . By thus serving others—and becoming ever more skilled and outstanding (unequal) in the process—he best serves his own interest.

. . . This comparative advantage in trading, which rewards the most renowned specialist, also rewards in similar fashion every other party to such trade, down to the very least-skilled participant in the market. This is not to say that their gains would be equal; only that each gains from the trade more goods and services than otherwise would have been his. . . . However wealthy or poor and skilled or unskilled . . . each finds a comparative advantage in trading—if it is voluntary.

Not only does this blessing of inequality flow from the mental or physical skills of traders; it also pertains to the capital, the tools of the trade, the savings and investments by individuals. The specialist who saves and develops tools becomes ever more specialized and efficient. And it is to the advantage of every participant in the market to encourage the saver and investor by respecting and protecting his property—even though the result is greater inequality of wealth than before. . . .

So, if a people would avoid falling to a low level of sameness and bare subsistence, the procedure is to cultivate and accentuate their differences in skills and in private ownership and use of property—these being the requisites for a flourishing and beneficial trade. . . .

That, in brief, is the economic case for inequality. Sadly, the misunderstanding and misapplication of the concept

> of "equality" affords a major explanation for the leveling programs—egalitarianism—going on in the world today. . . . So, I take my stand for inequality.
>
> Let us then enshrine inequality by acknowledging and embracing this fact of Nature—inequality—and, also, its working handmaiden: human freedom. Allow no interference with creative activities, which is to say, permit anyone to do anything he chooses so long as it is peaceful. A fair field and no favor!

Read sees through the logical errors in simplistic endorsements of equality. He sees that equality in the sense of common justice—the most essential kind of equality for individual liberty and social cooperation—is (even more so today) being crowded out by attempts to generate more equal results, which impose unequal treatment and violate common justice. Further, he sees that the vast gains that come from our inequalities—which are developed and put to good use in voluntary market interactions—are also at risk from attempts to equalize results. These are crucial lessons to learn if we hope to keep the many politically correct forms of equality from completely overwhelming both common justice and the gains made possible only by our differences.

71.

The Bloom Preexists in the Seed

History reveals an almost endless supply of people who want to remake society into their own imagined utopia. But in the monomaniacal focus on forcing people into a mold, the essential shortcomings of these reform attempts are ignored. The result cannot match the vision, and the means of achieving it must be unjust and undermine individual potential, the source of any true social advance.

Leonard Read is an astute observer of such coercive political panaceas. He frequently starts his rebuttals by quoting Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Cause and effect, means and ends, seed and fruit, cannot be severed; for the effect already blooms in the cause, the end pre-exists in the means, the fruit in the seed" (Emerson 1841).

Echoing Emerson, Read argues that the ends actually generated are implied in the means used. Thus, only moral means can achieve moral advances, while immoral means will result in moral decline. He makes the argument most clearly in "The Bloom Pre-Exists in the Seed," from his 1969 book *Let Freedom Reign* (Read 1969b).

> [Many] people expect to achieve lofty goals without any thought of the means they use to attain them . . . [but] a hard look at means and ends is appropriate. . . .
>
> Ends, goals, aims are but the hope for things to come, in a word, aspirations. They are not a part of the reality . . . from which may safely be taken the standards for right conduct. They are no more to be trusted as bench marks than are day dreams or flights of fancy. Many of the most monstrous deeds in human history have been perpetrated in the name of doing good—in pursuit of some "noble" goal. They illustrate the fallacy that the end justifies the means.
>
> . . . Examine carefully the means employed, judging them in terms of right and wrong, and the end will take care of itself. . . .
>
> An individualist . . . looks upon society as the upshot, outcome, effect, recapitulation incidental to what is valued

above all else, namely, each distinctive individual human being. . . .

. . . Nor is there a middle-of-the-road between collectivism and individualism.

. . . Professor Hayek said, . . . "We differ not so much on ultimate values, but on the effective *means* of achieving them." Thus, if we would find the distinction between collectivism and individualism . . . examine the actions—means—that are implicit in achieving the goals. . . .

. . . [There are] opposed means implicit in the pursuit of collectivism or of individualism. . . . So, for us to understand, . . . we must discover what is implicit in the collectivistic as well as in the individualistic approach.

Implicit in the collectivistic approach . . . is the masterminding of the people who make up society. . . . The control of the individual's life is from without. . . .

The collectivistic view holds that society is the prime concern. . . . The individual does not fit himself into place but, instead . . . is assigned that niche or role which the political priests believe will best serve whatever societal pattern they have formulated. . . . These coercive actions . . . are implicit in and must logically follow from the beehive way of looking at humanity. . . .

Implicit in this beehive view is that men exist who are competent to form the ways and shape the lives of human beings by the millions. . . . There are those who not only can rightly decide what is best for all of us but who can prescribe the details as to how the best that is in us can be realized. . . .

. . . Any conscientious collectivist, if he could see beyond his utopian goals and thus properly evaluate the authoritarian means his system of thought demands, would likely defect. . . . *Goals or ends must always be the summation of the means employed to achieve them. However lofty the goals, if the means be depraved, the result must reflect that depravity*. Therefore, the eventual outcome (bloom) of the collectivistic way of life may be accurately predicted by anyone who understands the means (planting) which must be employed. . . .

. . . People who call themselves individualists rarely reflect on the means implicit in their philosophy. Individualists thus overlook the merits of their means to the good life just as the collectivists overlook the shortcomings of their way. When only ends are envisioned and means ignored, there can be no reliable estimate as to whether the consequences will be good or bad.

When the individual replaces the beehive as the ultimate goal, . . . the means implicit in achieving such a goal must be radically different. . . .

. . . Either I will concentrate on me and my welfare or on others and their welfare; in other words, mind my own business or mind other people's business.

. . . In view of the obstacles to the relatively simple task of self-realization, reflect on the utter absurdity of my . . . undertaking to manage the lives of millions.

Attention to self is not a disregard for others. On the contrary, each individual best promotes his own self-interest by peaceful, social cooperation as in the free market. Indeed, the more I make of myself the more are others served by my existence. . . . The way to assume "social responsibility" is for the individual to rise . . . as far as possible. . . .

. . . The incentive of private ownership is far more powerful than the sentimental thrust of laboring for-the-good-of-all.

If we concede . . . that man has a right to his life, it follows that he has a right to sustain life, the sustenance being the fruits of one's own labor. Private ownership is as sacred as life itself.

Private ownership lies at the very root of individual liberty. Without it there can be no freedom; with it freedom is secure. For private ownership presupposes free choice in disposition, that is, freedom to exchange. It is senseless to talk about freedom if the right of private ownership be denied.

Can we pronounce a moral judgment on these means implicit in the individualistic goal . . . to the pursuit of self-perfection and the right of owning what one produces? . . .

> These means serve as a powerful thrust toward the individual's material, intellectual, moral, and spiritual emergence—and that is right! Others—those who comprise society—are the secondary beneficiaries of individual growth. If we would help others, let us first help ourselves by those means which qualify as righteous.

Leonard Read sees that coercive utopian "reforms" that substitute external dictation for individual choices—which are the only way for individuals to mature or "bloom"—are by their nature unjust and unsuccessful. In contrast, voluntary means that do not violate the rights of anyone are the only reliable path to individual growth and social advance. The bloom of liberty preexists in the seed of self-ownership, while the wilting of collectivism preexists in the seed of violations of self-ownership. That is a lesson which few have learned as well as Read and we are in desperate need of learning today.

72.

Reflections on America's Founding Documents

Politicians and opinion makers frequently refer to America's founding documents and what they mean today; however, the abyss between the policies their interpretations favor and those favored by the documents themselves demonstrates an incredible ability to miss the essential things that are there and to see what isn't there.

Leonard Read offers a welcome alternative to such misinterpretations and consequent policy mistakes. In particular, in his 1976 book *Comes the Dawn* (Read 1976a), three chapters—"The Heritage We Owe Our Children," "The Role of Differences," and "Two Directions at Once"—offer insight into what made America unique in the history of liberty.

From "The Heritage We Owe Our Children":

> A few men who did look into "the law of liberty" bequeathed to present-day Americans a unique heritage. They were the authors of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. In what respect were these political documents unique? First, they unseated government as the endower of men's rights. . . . Second, they more severely limited government than ever before—for the first time in history, hardly any organized coercion standing against the release of creative energy. Result? The greatest outburst of creative energy ever known, simply because the millions were free to act creatively as they pleased. Political power diminished and dispersed beyond the ready grasp of authoritarians who would run our lives. That was the American miracle! . . .
>
> . . . If we would retain and strengthen that heritage bequeathed to us, we *must* bequeath it to our children. . . .
>
> . . . Our politico-economic sires were familiar with the tyranny—authoritarianism—from which they found escape. . . . We, in our times . . . have little to go by except a dwindling hearsay. . . .

. . . A vast majority of this later generation are inclined to take the American miracle as much for granted as the air we breathe. . . .

What steps are required, then, for a return to liberty by the millions who have innocently gone along with "leaders" of the Command Society? . . .

. . . The initial step is to grasp the very essence of Americanism: ". . . that *all* men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty." This . . . for the first time in the history of nations, casts government out of that role. . . . Our heritage stems from this glorious triumph of human liberty—*everyone* free to act creatively as he chooses. . . .

The next step is to recognize the real meaning of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. . . .

For the true significance, reread the Constitution and the Bill of Rights and note that there are 45 "no's" and "not's" circumscribing governmental power. Reduced to a sentence, they decree: "Government, keep your coercive fingers out of these activities; we reserve these—all of them—to ourselves as free and self-responsible citizens!" . . .

An agency of society to invoke a common justice and to keep the peace is a social necessity. Its role is to codify the taboos—injustices—and punish any trespass on individual rights. . . . *But to expect that coercive force so delegated will be or even can be self-limiting is utterly absurd.* . . . This carelessness is fatal to a good society. Why? Our hoped-for protector turned plunderer, as we are witnessing.

There is one remedy, and one only: Eternal vigilance on the part of the citizenry is the price of liberty. How be vigilant? Master the "no's" and "not's" set forth in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights and insist with all the reason one can muster that the taboos limiting runaway power be strictly observed. If we would bequeath to our children that which our Founding Fathers bequeathed to us, this is the price. . . .

. . . Our Founding Fathers saw eye to eye on despotism and declared their independence of it. May we follow in their footsteps!

From "Two Directions at Once":

> The Constitution and Bill of Rights confirmed and aimed to perpetuate a novel theory of a servant government of strictly limited powers. In the decades that followed, citizens did not turn to government for succor, for government was so limited that it had nothing on hand to dispense, nor did it then have the power to take from some and give to others. In the absence of any political nursemaid, there developed a remarkable self-reliance among the people. Further, government was limited to defending life and the honest fruits of men's labors; it was not empowered to inhibit the creative actions of citizens. As a consequence, there was a freeing of creative human energy. In short, here was political liberty, the like of which had never existed elsewhere. Self-reliant men and women, freed from predators and freed from restraints on their creativity, brought into existence what is loosely referred to as "the American heritage."
>
> Americans, however, began to take the blessings of liberty for granted. Unprecedented well-being came to be regarded as an act of nature; progress seemed as inevitable as the sun's appearance in the morning. That the practice of difficult human virtues and political wisdom lay at the root of this new-world miracle was forgotten or, more likely, never learned by new generations . . . unaware of the rationale on which their magnificent edifice was erected. The intellectual and moral foundation weakened and the limitations on government were relaxed. Disaster—in the form of a return to the old-world pattern of sovereign state and servant people—was only a matter of time.
>
> . . . Most citizens, enjoying the forward thrust that was possible under limited governmental structures, came to believe that the ever-increasing governmental intervention they subsequently voted was responsible for their prosperity and well-being. Today, they fail to see that the genuine bounties in their situation are but the result of an earlier momentum precisely as they fail to recognize the bogus aspects of present "prosperity." Self-reliance and freed energies have made for such wealth that they can, for a time at least, take government pap without apparent immediate

injury. And many believe the pap to be the cause of their vitality.

. . . The crack in American constitutional theory certainly was not observed when it first occurred. . . .

We accepted a communistic doctrine when we adopted the Sixteenth Amendment . . . so it was natural that socialism in all its forms would follow in due course. One could hardly expect a people to embrace this plank from the *Communist Manifesto* and at the same time have any strong misgivings about other socialistic theories and practices. . . .

. . . What the socialistic system is: It is the opposite of the free market or willing exchange economy. It is forced, unwilling, coerced exchange. It rests on the suppression of creative human energy. It is the substitution of authoritarianism for market phenomena.

To commandeer, that's it! Webster defines "commandeer" "to take arbitrary possession of; to commandeer men or goods.". . . . The honest fruits of our labors are commandeered. . . . No one can possibly name all the commandeering by our thousands of governments. However, this we can deduce: One's earnings or capital would be employed otherwise if free choice rather than commandeering prevailed. Keep in mind that the very essence of ownership is control; that which I do not control, I do not own! The political order that features commandeering can be appropriately termed, "The Command Society."

Freedom loses ground because of our taking-for-granted attitudes, our lethargy, our unawareness. But . . . our freedom is conditioned on our understanding of its nature and purpose.

From "The Role of Differences":

I side with the English poet, William Cowper:

> Tis liberty alone that gives the flower
> Of fleeting life its lustre and perfume,
> *And we are weeds without it. All constraint*
> *Except what wisdom lays on evil men*
> *Is evil.*

> Briefly, all constraint against the freedom of any individual to act creatively as he chooses is evil. . . .
>
> . . . A new Constitution . . . would be but a reflection or echoing of the preponderant leadership thinking of our time. As a consequence, it would resemble the Communist Manifesto! . . .
>
> . . . Whatever shows forth on today's political horizon reflects our preponderant leadership thinking. The Declaration, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights were a reflection of the leadership thinking two centuries ago. Not perfect, but history's best—by far! Note that these documents are no more than scraps of paper today, because our leadership thinking is too corrupt to sustain such wisdom.
>
> Let our thinking improve until those in public office no longer vie with each other as to the good they can do for us with our money. Improve our thinking . . . and they will contend with each other to advance free market, private ownership, limited government ideas and ideals. . . .
>
> The mess we observe today is but the effect of hanging onto yesterday's poor thinking. . . .
>
> . . . Every socialistic cliche serves as a steppingstone toward making a better case for freedom. . . .
>
> Liberty . . . will not grace a people who are slumping into apathy, who quit thinking for selves, or who let prosperity—a by-product of liberty—go to their heads. Merely scrutinize what's going on. . . .
>
> What then must we learn? To perceive and to adhere to the virtue—integrity, statesmanship, moral exemplarity on a higher plane than has ever been known.

Americans today do not live in the world of limited government created by our founders and founding documents but in a world of unlimited government restricted only by a few favored constitutional rights still defended by the Supreme Court. Leonard Read reminds us how truly stupendous was the human growth and creativity unleashed by history's greatest demotion of government from its authoritarian control over individual lives. But he also reminds us how much we have regressed. History's freest society has largely become a command society because we have rapidly expanded the areas in which we are commanded or commandeered. Recovering Read's wisdom is now more important than ever.

73.

Progress Depends on Freedom

People often claim various sorts of freedom, asserting them as rights, but they may not think through the meaning of freedom with as much care as the topic deserves. In conducting a serious examination of freedom, we may discover that we have been deceiving ourselves.

Leonard Read considers freedom with a care that others might not invest. If we wish to think as carefully as he does, we should consider what he had to say in "Progress Depends on Freedom," from his 1971 book *Then Truth Will Out* (Read 1971a).

From what should anyone wish to be free? . . .

> . . . Why try to think this one through? . . . No social concept is more important to understand than freedom, and . . . no word, standing by itself, conjures up a greater variety of meanings and connotations than freedom. Used alone, that is, in the absence of definitive phrases, the word explains nothing. When I say only that I stand for freedom, all people, even communists, will agree with me, although what they have in mind may well be the very opposite of what I mean. . . .
>
> . . . Freedom . . . is *fundamental*. . . . Freedom is not man's goal, but without it man can never achieve his goals. Freedom is . . . man's most important "tool," the essential means to his progress. . . . And let us bear in mind that freedom is not a social relationship to be designed, constructed, or created; freedom exists unless prevented, that is, it exists *in the absence of restraints*.
>
> . . . *From* what should anyone wish to be free? . . .
>
> . . . People not only demand freedom *from* various disturbing influences but demand it as a *right*.
>
> . . . So far as I am concerned, one has a right to do anything he pleases—silly or brilliant—if the action in no way infringes upon the creative aspirations of any other person.
>
> . . . Freedom is not some incidental gimmick but is *fundamental* to all progress.

Reflect on freedom *from* want, a highly popularized and broadly accepted concept. Is this valid? Yes, so long as it remains a strictly personal aspiration. It is legitimate to seek freedom from destitution—poverty—and other deterrents to fulfillment.

But have we a *right* to be free *from* want? The word "right" in this context can have but a single meaning: a claim on the resources of others. And this is the only meaning it does have in today's political world. The mere fact of my existence, regardless of my indolence, laziness, incompetence, misfortune, or whatever, entitles me, so it is argued, to a "decent standard of living" at the expense of you and others. And, further, you are negligent, antisocial, and unrighteous if you object—for is not my claim on you a *right?* What this absurdity really means is that you have no *right* to refuse my demands!

Or take freedom from fear, another common political phrase. All of us wish to escape fear. But do I have a *right* to be free *from* fear? This, again, implies that you and others have a commitment to shelter me against fearsome events to which I may be exposed, possibly through my own action or negligence. Plainly, an absurdity!

Freedom *from* competition appears to be a natural or at least an instinctive aspiration. . . . Most people favor competition for everyone except themselves. . . . Can competition against me be wrong if it is right for all others to compete?

But has anyone a *right* to be free from competition? Or, is this of the same order of absurdity as a *right* to be free from want or fear? Implicit in the noncompetition argument is a denial of entry by others into one's chosen domain. It is nothing less than a claim to the championship founded not on a contest in creative efficiency and consumer-pleasing ability but, rather, a tantrum-like urge to be champion. Each person who suffers this monopolistic fever is saying in effect, "Stay out of my ring all of you would-be contenders; I cherish my privileged position and insist that it remain exclusively mine." And note the arguments they'll conjure up to "prove" that their cases are exceptional!

> There appears to be no end to life's obstacles and contests and the nagging desire to be free from them. If anyone of them tops the list, it probably is the itch to be free from the responsibility for self. Obviously, there's no *right* to free myself from me, that is, for me to foist myself and my problems upon you. . . .
>
> Responsibility for self is a privilege to be embraced, not a terror to be shunned or a burden from which to be freed. *Becoming* is man's highest goal—achievement consonant with each individual's uniqueness, whatever it is. . . . The art of becoming is composed of acts of overcoming. Obstacles, problems of varying sorts, are stepping stones to achievement. When I turn the responsibility for me over to you and others, or let government take it away from me, the essence of my being is removed. . . .
>
> . . . All ideas, inventions, discoveries, insights, flashes of intuition take place only in those moments when responsibility for self is being experienced. . . .
>
> . . . Is there, then, something *from* which we should be free and have a *right* to be free? Indeed, there is!
>
> Keeping in mind that man's highest goal is intellectual, moral, and spiritual progress along the line of each individual's creative uniqueness and that this is a condition which exists at its best in *the absence of restraints*, it follows that to be free from restraints is the most important means to man's ends or purposes.
>
> . . . We have a *right* to be free *from* the power plays of those possessed by the little god syndrome.
>
> From all of this can easily be deduced an appropriate definition of freedom as related to the social realm: *no man-concocted restraints against the release of creative energy*. Freedom, as thus defined, is all-important to man's highest goals, to his progress. Freedom is neither "narrow" nor "limited." Freedom is fundamental!

Read considers asserted freedoms from want, fear, and competition, and found that each asserts freedom from responsibility; therefore, they not only remove the basis of individual growth and development but also force that responsibility on others. He sees that to enable such development requires a very different type of freedom—freedom from artificially imposed

restraints, "the most important means to man's ends." For those who take as a crucial goal of society the development of individuals rather than their use as fodder for others, Read's understanding of freedom deserves serious consideration.

74.

How to Decontrol

While Leonard Read published a vast array of articles in his efforts to advance liberty, he also gave many speeches. One of those speeches—"How to De-control: Divest Your Mind of Attachments to Power" (Read 1946)—is of particular interest because it was given the year he began the Foundation for Economic Education and because its focus—the question of easing government controls after the end of World War II, is again a major issue in the aftermath of the wide swath of controls imposed in response to covid.

Fortunately, his speech—given to the National Butter, Poultry, and Egg Association on September 16, 1946 in Chicago, Illinois, is now available, having been published by FEE in 2016, seventy years later.

> Officially, the United States is still at war. This is because, so it is alleged, of the fearful things that would happen to the population if you and I, and our fellow Americans, were as free to carry on our affairs as before the war.
>
> In fact, our rulers consider freedom to be so dangerous that in June of this year, the Federal Government was employing more people to control you and me than at the end of the war in August of last year. . . .
>
> This reluctance of government to surrender in peacetime the authority given it for war purposes is not new. It has existed after every war, both in this country and in others. The destruction of liberty has always been one of the chief evils of war. . . .
>
> Those who take their opinions from Washington and the Federal bureaucracy have come to regard liberty, not as man's birthright, which government was established to protect, but as a special privilege to be doled out by a benevolent State. They see liberty, not as a necessity for man's moral growth and economic progress, but as a rare luxury to be indulged in only under certain fortunate circumstances. They think of their fellow-citizens, not as adult individuals, capable of responsibility and discrimination, but as childlike masses, foolish and irresponsible.

According to this opinion, the citizens' problems—housing shortages, strikes, inflation, deflation, bottlenecks, surpluses, unemployment or labor shortages [all traceable back to government restrictions]—all show the inability of the individual to take care of himself, and, consequently, prove the need for government intervention.

If we accept this view, the question of when to "de-control" becomes as futile as the question of when people will cease to have problems and difficulties. Every new event, problem or condition will be regarded as a new emergency continuance of extension of "control."

Of one thing I am certain, therefore. If you listen only to Washington, you will never be decontrolled. New emergencies will produce new justifications, one after another, seeming to warrant, not decontrol, but new controls supposedly designed to make more effective the controls already in effect. . . .

Government is by its very nature a restrictive agency . . . given authority and means to use violence. . . .

This authority and means of violence bestow on government the power of compulsion, or coercion. It should never be forgotten, however, that coercion is always restrictive, never . . . productive or creative. . . .

Therefore, whenever government appears to have accomplished something, remember that it is only by destroying or restricting something else. In judging a proposal for government intervention, consider what is to be destroyed or prevented as well as what the advocates put forth as the object to be accomplished.

When government restrains theft or private assault, it releases energy for production and creative purposes. When, however, the policeman turns from his job of preventing theft and mayhem to telling producers what to produce and how, the net result is a reduction in production and trade. . . .

. . . Authority to use violence against citizens . . . bestows no wisdom. The policeman cannot decide what producers want and need. Only producers can do this for themselves. Therefore, every attempt by government to

direct production for civilian, peacetime use results in a net loss to the nation.

You will find, therefore, the world over and throughout all history that man has progressed in proportion as government intervention has been limited to its primary function of protecting producers against violence and predation, foreign or domestic. . . . Stagnation, confusion and retrogression have developed and persisted in proportion as government has departed from its protective function and has turned to interfering with the freedom of producers. . . .

Those who are now seriously debating how and when to de-control, therefore, make me think of how a similar group might approach the problems a man flat on his back, struggling in the grasp of a burly ruffian who has him by the throat with knees firmly planted in his midriff. . . .

. . . How to de-control? How do you take your hands off someone's throat? You take them off! These controls are nothing but the suppression of human energy. Suppression, that's all! Let all the controllers go home. . . .

Do you recall that the successful presidential candidate in 1932 was elected on a platform and by campaign speeches calling for a dismantling of an overgrown Federal bureaucracy, a cessation of governmental meddling, reduction of government expenditures and taxes, a balanced budget, adherence to the gold standard, and a return to free, competitive enterprise? This platform, the speeches, and the election results registered a widespread recognition of the leading role government policies had played in causing and prolonging the depression which began in 1929. . . .

Far from proving the instability of free enterprise or the dangers or liberty, United States history . . . shows how each new statist intervention gives rise to new problems and greater emergencies. . . .

If there is a line or reasoning which can be used to justify any attempt by government to control prices or wages, or to redistribute wealth for one minute, one week or one year, it can be used to justify all such interferences forever. That is because every such argument is based on the premise that what any individual earns belongs, not to him, but

to anyone or everyone else, according to what government decides.

Once this collectivist premise is admitted as a justification for bureaucratic interference with producers, government becomes predatory rather than protective.

Each new government seizure of wealth or restriction of enterprise creates new problems, new emergencies, new shortages, plunder. Each of these new conditions, in turn, appears to provide new excuses for new "controls," or restrictions, and for new seizures of wealth from some individuals for the supposed benefit of other.

Thus, as my friend, the late Albert J. Nock put it, government becomes a State—the enemy of man.

Today, as after other wars or crises brought on by Statism, the forces of individualism are again struggling to resume the offensive. This age-old struggle to reclaim man's birthright of freedom again calls for the enlistment of every patriot . . . to combat the Frankenstein monster of collectivism which harries and harasses us at every turn. . . .

Even in America, men are being increasingly cowed and silenced by the popularity and prestige of the collectivist idea. . . .

In fact, the collectivist way of thinking has held sway over most of the World for the most of time. Denying the concept of unalienable rights, it maintains that the individual's efforts, his person and even his personality, belong to others, to the group; that the group can manage him in accordance with its own preference, it any way it wishes, for the benefit of whatever it decides to be its own good. According to this view, therefore, each person lives only by the sanction of others and for the sake of others—the majority. . . .

The opposing view is the New World, American concept. Over the ages it has been a dream in the minds of only a few, but for a brief period it came near realization in this country. It is the individualistic concept.

Individualism maintains that the individual has unalienable rights, which cannot be taken away from him by any other person, nor by any number of persons, group

or collection of other persons. It insists that each individual exists by his own right and for his own sake, and not for the sake of the group, the collective or the state.

Under individualism you have the free economy. The idea is, to each the full value of his product. There are no controls over the individual beyond a restriction of such acts as may be harmful to other. There are no controls over the individual beyond a restriction of such acts as may be harmful to others. His property and his income are his, except that share required to finance an honest government of limited powers. In the view of the individualist, the injunction, "Thou shalt not steal!" applies to legislators in their official lawmaking capacities as well as in their private affairs.

Under a government which observes moral law as an engineer takes account of physical law, the individual cultivates thrift, honesty, knowledge, self-discipline, self-restraint, good manners, good sportsmanship, because these virtues are essential to personal happiness and welfare and are necessary for getting along with fellow man. . . .

. . . Making the case for individualism, for the free economy and for limited government, explaining their meanings and high benefit, is the greatest educational challenge facing this nation today.

It is this task that the Foundation for Economic Education has set for itself. . . .

My conclusion is simple. Divest the minds of American citizen of collectivistic and "managed economy" notions. It is, in the end, the only way to de-control and to stay de-controlled.

75.

Nuclear Giants and Ethical Infants

It is commonplace to hear about how much more we know than our ancestors. Many have long taken that to imply that we are more advanced than they were or that the accumulation of knowledge will continue to improve (or progress, if you claim to be a progressive) over time. But while that is undeniable in some areas, the opposite might be true in others. We may have regressed in more important ways than we have progressed.

Leonard Read makes this important but often overlooked argument in "Nuclear Giants and Ethical Infants" (Read 1964d), from the August 1964 issue of *The Freeman*. His insights about the state of our knowledge and America's educational system deserve to be recalled, given how coercive and controversial education is today.

> [We have] a superfluity of technical know-how relative to general wisdom or understanding . . . a dangerous and grotesque imbalance. . . .
>
> . . . Our educational emphasis is more on accumulating know-how than on gaining wisdom or understanding. . . . We have know-how galore. . . .
>
> But where is the understanding to balance the know-how? . . . Are we not, as a nation, on the same reckless course that has brought about the fall of one civilization after another? Self-responsibility—amidst an abundance of know-how and a paucity of wisdom, understanding, conscience, ethics, insight—has given way to government responsibility for our security, welfare, and prosperity. . . .
>
> Unwisely, we increase the curbs on individual initiative. . . . The directive of one's behavior is less and less what conscience dictates as right. . . . A rapidly expanding know-how, unless balanced by a commensurately expanding wisdom, assuredly spells disaster.

What kind of wisdom is Read referring to here? Because people are different in many ways, the key to a more moral or ethical society is individual integrity, or "fidelity to one's highest conscience," subject to our common "moral obligation not to impair the life, livelihood, or liberty of others."

Such wisdom requires that individuals exercise their own decisions about how best to live rather than having decisions imposed on them by some collective determination.

> The first stage of wisdom requires that we understand the virtues and how to live them. Integrity, that is, fidelity to one's highest conscience, is foremost and basic. . . .
>
> . . . Note the millions of individuals who actually believe that the rest of us would fare better were we a reflection of themselves. . . .
>
> . . . [Consider] only two individuals, you and me. . . . I know more about myself than anyone else does . . . [and] you know yourself better than I know you.
>
> . . . You and I are not alike. . . . My aptitudes, faculties, potentialities, likes and dislikes, yearnings, inhibitions, ambitions, capabilities and inabilities to learn about this or that, are not at all like yours. As to our common ground, each of us has a moral obligation not to impair the life, livelihood, or liberty of others. Beyond this . . . we are at variance in every particularity.

What does this have to do with our schools? It goes to the very heart of seeking wisdom.

> Examine my possible educational relationships to you. . . . The proper role is to let you draw on such know-how and understanding as I may possess and as you may determine. Education is a seeking, probing, taking-from process and the initiative must rest with the seeker. . . . Your progress depends on your desire to learn. . . . Mine is, at best, only an exemplar's role: it is to improve myself to the utmost and thus to persuade solely by precept and example. . . .
>
> . . . When you are at liberty to glean from me or any others as you may choose, . . . you will gravitate in due course toward that balance of know-how and wisdom needed for the fulfillment distinctive to your own person. . . .
>
> My second possible role is that of demigod. . . . I shall compel your (or your children's) classroom attendance, write your curriculum in accord with my notions of your needs and force it upon you and, lastly, I shall coercively extort the financial wherewithal from all and sundry to

> defray the costs of imposing my own peculiar brand of knowledge upon you. . . .
>
> . . . The approach of the demigod . . . is antagonistic to the advancement of wisdom. . . .
>
> . . . Coercion . . . is, by definition, repressive and destructive. . . . Acquiring understanding or wisdom springs from the volitional faculty. . . .
>
> . . . If . . . the forcible casting of you (or your children) in my image is wrong . . . government schooling . . . is precisely the same thing, except on the grand scale.
>
> Someone might well object to such a claim: "Surely you don't believe our massive public expenditures on education produce nothing of value" (as if that was the relevant standard). But even to that misdirecting question, Read has an interesting response. A great deal of first-rate education goes on in our government school systems; but . . . in spite of, not because of, the coercive or governmental aspects. Untold millions of teachers and students, in many of their day-to-day relationships, are on a voluntary, not a coercive basis; to a large extent the students are selecting their teachers. But wherever coercion insinuates itself into schooling . . . an imbalance of know-how and wisdom will become evident. Wisdom will decrease, not increase.

Read argues that government intrusion into education is at the heart of our "imbalance of know-how and wisdom." The justification for this intrusion is the false premise that an appropriate education must be imposed because people cannot be trusted to choose for themselves.

> Billions of dollars are forcibly collected from all of us—limiting our individual pursuits—and used to pay for government's know-how pursuits. . . . Compulsion—government intervention in the educational market—accounts, in no small measure, for the imbalance of know-how and wisdom.
>
> . . . We have many private educational institutions. . . . But so-called private institutions in a statist society are not . . . free market in character. . . . They are licensed and regulated and increasingly financed by their statist "competition." . . . Education is preponderantly statist . . . [and] so

> much of the nation's resources are converted to know-how pursuits. . . .
>
> . . . Inquire how we in the U.S.A. got off on the wrong foot. . . .
>
> History reveals the original "reasoning" to have been somewhat as follows: America is to be a haven for free men. To accomplish this, we must have a people's, not a tyrant's government. However, such a democratic plan will never work unless the people are educated. But free citizens, left to their own resources, will not accomplish their intellectual upbringing. Therefore, "we" must educate "them": compulsory attendance in school, government dictated curricula, forcible collection to defray the costs.
>
> . . . Imagine: *We will insure freedom to "the people" by denying freedom to them in education, for if their education is entrusted to freedom they will remain uneducated and, thus, will not be able to enjoy the blessings of freedom*!

Can we recover the wisdom that has been lost to coercive education?

> How can we ever expect a people brought up on coercion to be free of demigod mentalities? Does a coercive educational system have the intellectual soil and climate where freedom and wisdom may flourish? . . .
>
> . . . [We have] hooked up coercion to the spirit of inquiry . . . [but] any light coercion produces is not in the form of wisdom.
>
> Once on this coercive trek toward . . . know-how in everything and understanding in nothing . . . you and I and others need to recover from our demigod pose . . . to reject compulsion and to accept liberty in education. How . . . can a people be free or wise unless they are brought up in, steeped in, believe in, and understand that growth in wisdom presupposes freedom of the individual to pursue what is wise?

Read followed up "Nuclear Giants and Ethical Infants" with "The Case for the Free Market in Education" (Read 1964c), from the September 1964 issue of *The Freeman*. In the essay, he argues that freedom is justified in education no less than in logic and history.

> Remove the police force—government as boss—and education is restored to the free, competitive market. . . .
>
> . . . Assume that you are no longer compelled to send Johnnie to school; no government committee will prescribe what Johnnie must study; no government tax collector will take a penny of yours or anyone else's income for schooling. This, it must be emphasized, is the free market assumption. . . .
>
> . . . [Ask people] if they would let their children go uneducated were all governmental compulsions removed. . . . "I would no more let my children go without an education than I would let them go without shoes and stockings." . . .
>
> . . . Were there to be no more police-force-as-boss in education . . . [then, as] any person who understands the free market knows . . . there would be more education and better education. . . .
>
> It is a . . . blindness to the enormous evidence in support of freedom . . . that accounts for much of the lost faith in educational productiveness were the educational system relieved of restraints and compulsions. . . .
>
> Those who want education . . . will have education. . . . Remove all police-force-as-boss, and we remove education's chief obstacle.

Americans are highly dissatisfied with their educational systems. Controversies rage over the 1619 Project, critical race theory, attempts to incorporate "social justice" into math, and much more. For Leonard Read, such problems derive from government's coercive involvement. If we replace the perpetually disappointing faith in force, "education's chief obstacle," with Read's faith in freedom, we can bring about a world with more wisdom and less controversy over what educational material self-identified demigods should force on others. That sounds like a win-win situation to me.

76.

Know-It-All-ness

When people hold differing positions on issues, they should debate using logic and evidence. But many people who attack defenders of liberty try to dismiss their libertarian challenges. They often do so by characterizing libertarians as wild-eyed, antigovernment extremists, whose biases supposedly put them so far from mainstream American life that their arguments can be ignored because they reflect animus rather than reasoned belief.

Leonard Read certainly fits the libertarian mold, but he rebuts the claim that libertarian positions represent antigovernment bias. He makes the point clearly in "The Enemy: A Psychosis," from his 1965 book *The Free Market and Its Enemy* (Read 1965b). We would benefit from Read's insightful distinction between government, which has a valid purpose in furthering liberty, and out-of-bounds government, which has been taken over by mistaken know-it-alls.

> The achievements of this free market are arrogated to an "I" in dangerous proportions . . . a false and an unwarranted egotism. It is an estimation of self so remote from reality that it must be described as a psychosis. . . .
>
> The real enemy of the free market is this very know-it-all-ness!
>
> Contrary to what many antisocialists claim, the enemy of the free market is not the state, that is, if "state" be used interchangeably with government. This formal agency of society, when organized to keep the peace, to invoke a common justice under law, and to inhibit and penalize fraud, violence, misrepresentation, and predation is a necessary and soundly principled ally of the free market. . . .
>
> To settle and exclusively dwell on overextended government as the enemy is to let the real culprit go unnoticed. . . . We blame distorted government while giving no attention to the psychosis which is responsible for the distortion. . . .
>
> . . . The real foe is the *ignorance of being ignorant* . . . know-it-alls . . . because they are authoritarian in spirit. . . .

. . . Ignorant of their ignorance, it is their ignorance which they must inflict on the rest of us if they can find the means to do so. But there is no way for them to realize their ambition without employing compulsion. The know-it-alls, by themselves, do not possess enough compulsive force to inflict their ignorance on the rest of us. What to do? They seek and often obtain positions in society's agency of organized force: government. . . .

Government, per se, is not the enemy of the free market; it is not the root of the authoritarianism that is plaguing us. Rather, it is the psychotics—the little Napoleons—who have taken roost in government. . . . [Do not] downgrade society's agency for keeping the peace because unpeaceful know-it-alls have taken over. Government, per se, is not our problem. Instead, we have a widespread, pervasive psychosis on our hands. . . .

This psychosis is a detachment from reality. It is a self-assessment that has no basis in fact. I refer to the victims as "little Napoleons" because . . . while he couldn't run the affairs of his home life, he entertained no doubt about his ability to manage the world. . . .

Bear in mind that Hitler was only an indifferent paper hanger; he was competent at nothing except leading millions to believe that the world would be better off were he in charge. . . .

. . . Whenever any individual loses account of how little he knows and believes that his guidance might supplant that of the free market to universal advantage . . . he has contracted this mental illness. . . .

Now, constrict the market. Let persons who are ignorant of their own ignorance capture positions which put compulsive power at their disposal. Their, not "Thy," will be done! These people will—and do on an enormous scale—coercively take the fruits of the labor of all citizens for the purpose of reconstructing the economy along lines which they (in their ignorance) think best. An economy founded on common consent—the free market—is abandoned in favor of an economy founded on unilateral consent—theirs! . . .

> . . . No good end is possible which is achieved by a bad means, for the end pre-exists in the means. . . . Any means is bad that rests on coercion of peaceful persons. . . . If we grasp the point that these coercive projects stem from ignorance, we ought to suspect that they might be destructive.
>
> What can be the remedy for this dangerous psychosis? . . . Awareness: the miraculousness of the free market, on the one hand, and what "I" don't know, on the other. . . .
>
> To possess and to exert coercive power over the creative actions of others makes overassessment of self inevitable. The very acceptance of this form of power cancels any ability to apprehend its evil. . . . Thus, not only is the offender corrupted but, as well, all of those beholden to his inflicted ignorance.

Leonard Read clearly demonstrates the fallacies underlying the almost uncountable ways government displaces liberty. The root of the problem is not government in general but know-it-alls who impose their misguided "wisdom" through the coercive apparatus of government. In contrast, the only weapon libertarians have is voluntary persuasion. Until the mindset that supports coercion can finally be dissolved, progress against government abuses of liberty will remain infrequent and tenuous.

77.

Wishes and Rights

Any careful observer of American politics must be struck by the expanding roster of things people have asserted they have rights to. But when such claimed rights are seriously considered, there is often little substance beyond a shared desire or wish for something and the supposed implication of a right to it. From there, it is but one more step to the legislative or judicial attempt to create such rights, which are promoted as social improvements guaranteed by government.

Few have thought as much or as carefully about this confusion between wishes and rights as Leonard Read. His insights are particularly well developed in "Doctor, Whoever You Are," from his 1969 book *Let Freedom Reign* (Read 1969b), and "When Wishes Become Rights," from his 1967 book *Deeper than You Think* (Read 1967). In a world in which wishes are turned into political rights, Read's views are worth serious consideration.

From "Doctor, Whoever You Are":

> Now in vogue is a fearful combination of wishes and methods, as fanciful as Aladdin's lamp, and spreading like wildfire: *the transmutation of wishes into rights*! Do you wish for better housing? Then better housing is a right. Do you wish for a Gateway Arch in St. Louis, a Mall in Fresno, higher returns for goods and services, shorter hours of labor, protection from competition? Then these are rights. Do you wish for free medical care? Then free medical care is a right!
>
> And what is the nature of the jinni called upon to transmute wishes into rights? It is organized police force: government. It extorts from all, allocating the legalized loot to those who effectively make their wishes heard. . . .
>
> How do we go about healing this sickness? We must acquire an understanding that wishes, regardless of how numerous, do not constitute a right. *I have no more right to your professional attention than you have a claim on me to wash your dishes*. We are dealing with an absurdity. . . .
>
> . . . We live and prosper by specialization and exchange. . . . Others tend to encourage me to specialize at what is of

value to them, and I tend to encourage them to specialize at what is of value to me. This is how people in a free society exert their wishes. But note that these wishes do not carry with them any right on my part to *command* what others shall produce or any right to *force* on them the terms of exchange.

When the notion that a wish is a right is put into effect by police force—the only way it can be done—then specialization is no longer guided by consumer wishes nor are the terms of exchange. . . . Other citizens are then forced to perform labor for which they receive absolutely nothing in return. Exchange is by coercion rather than by free choice. . . .

. . . The fact that many of us wish more medical attention than we can afford does not give us a right to your services or a right to force others to make up the difference, wishes to the contrary notwithstanding!

From "When Wishes Become Rights":

Reflect on [distress]. . . . What a field for the would-be philanthropist if all these wants were within his power to fulfill! . . .

. . . Benjamin Franklin [wrote,] "If man could have Half his Wishes, he would double his Troubles." . . . If a man's objectives could be achieved for nothing more than wishes, no good would be served, deterioration would ensue. Struggle, earning one's spurs, conscious effort, calling on one's potentialities and bringing them into use are essential to survival—to say nothing of progress. This is crystal clear to a few. But not to the many!

A majority of Americans, today, would accept the magic lamp. For it is obvious that most persons who would gratify a wish *at the expense of others* would more readily do so *at no expense to others*. Such wishers are among us by the millions, all in pursuit of something for nothing—effortless wish gratification.

These many Americans have found their magic lamp in the Federal political apparatus, and what a jinni! . . .

Aladdin's jinni performed only on call; it responded to wishes when requested. This modern American version, on the other hand, displays zealous initiative in that it:

1. invents wishes for people;
2. persuades people that these wishes are their own and, then, actively solicits their gratification;
3. convinces people that these wishes are among their natural rights, and
4. casts itself in the role of "helper." . . .

Further, the jinni insinuates its golden goals into the minds of people as wishes capable of fulfillment. The jinni appears in nearly every community of the nation and in many countries of the world selling its wishing wares . . . largess is urged upon the citizenry. . . .

But it would hardly do for this jinni to gratify wishes were the performance attended by any sense of guilt on the people's part. So, how does the jinni dispose of this hazard? Simple! It transmutes wishes into "rights." . . .

Except in this political never-never land, it would be absurd to labor the point that a mere wish for material betterment does not create a right to its fulfillment; that is, a wish does not, in any moral or ethical sense, establish a claim on someone else's property. Yet, transparent as is such double-think, this is precisely what is accepted by a majority of our countrymen . . . that the citizen has a claim on the property of others. . . . [These are] false rights. . . .

Rights, in the context under examination, are claims. When we say we have a right to life and liberty, we are staking out our claim to them. We find our sanction for this in the self-evident fact that life and liberty are an endowment of the Creator, not of society or the collective or government.

But, when people say they have a right to a job or to enjoy the arts or to lower power and light rates or to an education or to a decent standard of living, they are staking out a claim to the fruits of the labor of others. Where rests the sanction for this claim? It simply comes from the notion that a wish is a right.

The absurdity of this wish-is-a-right sanction comes clear if we reduce the problem to manageable proportions: a you-and-me situation. Do I have a just or rational or moral or ethical claim to use your income? . . .

Most people victimized by the magic transmutation of wishes into rights will, in this you-and-me situation, answer the above questions in the negative. What escapes them is that the problem is not altered one whit by adding one person or a hundred or a million of them. And, if it be contended that numbers do matter . . . what is the magic number? A majority? Must we not infer from this majoritarian cliche the indefensible proposition that might makes right? . . .

The modern jinni, however, must go on to even greater magic. For it is not adequate merely to dream up wishes for people, to sell them on accepting the wishes, and to solicit the gratification thereof. And more is required than to transmute the wishes into rights. One other bit of abracadabra is a must if the jinni's image is to remain unassailable: the jinni must cast itself and be popularly accepted in the role of helper. To be thought of as . . . a robber of Peter to pay Paul would destroy the whole illusion.

In any community in the land may be found people pointing with pride to some "necessity" the local citizens could not or would not finance, explaining that it was made possible "with *the help* of the Federal government." . . .

The modern American jinni, lacking supernatural powers, cannot bring down manna from heaven. Being earthly, its manna is earthly in origin. Having nothing whatsoever of its own, its "gifts" must, perforce, stem from what is taken by coercion from others. It cannot be otherwise.

. . . Do these "gifts" qualify as help? Is this jinni, in fact, a helper? Are the "beneficiaries" really helped? If we can answer these questions in the negative, we come out from under the jinni's spell.

Help is a social term. At least two persons—the helper and the help—are implicit in its meaning. . . . The extent to which one is helped is measured precisely by the nature

and amount of the helper's contribution. What is received by the one is what comes from the other. . . .

Property taken without consent is correctly branded as ill-gotten. If passed on to another, the other receives ill-gotten property. . . . According to moral law, as well as the law of the land, one who takes property without the owner's consent commits a crime. When such property is passed on to and accepted by another, the other is adjudged an accomplice to the crime.

Property taken without consent cannot be given, for to give is conditioned on and presupposes ownership by the giver. I cannot give that which is not mine. Thus, the jinni's largess cannot qualify as gifts but only as loot. Citizens who have been pointing with pride at . . . their subsidized this-or-that should modify their exclamations: "See what we have done with the loot of the Federal government!"

Loot is not help, one who loots is not a helper, and one who accepts the loot is not really helped.

. . . However strong the compulsion in most of us to modify or improve the lot of other people, if we would avoid causing more harm than good, we must confine ourselves to those aids that stimulate the renewed exercise of the volitional faculties in others. . . .

I must not, in picking to pieces the notion that wishes are rights, leave the impression that wishes, of and by themselves, are proper objects of scorn. On the contrary, wishes, hopes, aspirations are among the most important forces motivating human progress, evolution, emergence. At issue here is only the means of their gratification.

We who reject illusory schemes are not denying the good life to others but merely pointing out that these political nostrums can lead only to . . . dead ends.

No good end can be reached by choosing a wrong way.

As we uncover more and more wrong ways, the right way begins to take form. It is the greatest gratifier of human wishes ever come upon—when allowed to operate. It is as morally sound as the Golden Rule. It is the way of willing exchange, of common consent, of self-responsibility, of open opportunity. It respects the right of each to the product of

> his own labor. It limits the police force to keeping the peace. It is the way of the free market, private property, limited government. On its banner is emblazoned *Individual Liberty*.
>
> But what looms as the right way has, in the minds of many people, emblazoned on its banner only the sign of the dollar . . . and, thus, is largely rejected.

If not for the corrupting lure of getting something for nothing, people would long ago have rejected the idea that wishes imply rights. But as more wishes have been granted, most Americans have stopped thinking about the burdens borne due to these invented rights. Our reasoning has been warped to serve a very narrow view of our self-interest. This makes it particularly important to revisit Leonard Read's wisdom about wishes and rights; otherwise, our coveting will corrupt us further and further.

78.

Inhibiting Infractions of the Moral Law, Not Promoting Them

One of the most seminal questions about government concerns the appropriate limits on government-enacted law.

If we follow the rationale of Locke as well as America's founders, all citizens, if given the choice, would prefer to have a very limited government. Through the joint defense of everyone's rights, government can benefit all citizens. But benefiting some at the expense of others does not expand the "general welfare" referred to in our Constitution's preamble.

Today, lawmaking seems constrained only by those parts of the Bill of Rights still in vogue with the Supreme Court. But such limitless ability was condemned by prerevolutionary thinkers (such as Algernon Sydney as well as John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, authors of the widely influential *Cato's Letters*) and America's founders as tyranny.

Leonard Read's "Law versus Tyranny," from his 1975 book *Castles in the Air* (Read 1975a), revisits the crucial distinction between a government that is a blessing to its people and one that is "out of bounds," imposing harm on the many whom it is supposed to serve. Because such foundational issues seem to be all but ignored today, it is worth reconsidering his logic.

> Does reason govern law? . . . Were reason to govern, it would seem, at the very least, that we should have a sounder conception of what law is than is now the case.
>
> . . . What is law? Is it a body of legal edicts backed by force? Or a consciousness of moral obligations? . . .
>
> . . . Which takes precedence, a body of legal edicts backed by force-the club—or a consciousness of moral obligations? I say, . . . the latter . . . [not] an outpouring of legal edicts . . . designed to control the affairs of society.
>
> . . . I proudly profess to being a moralist or an ethicist. I subscribe to the proposition that there are laws of nature and the universe, of Creation, that should be discovered and respected. I believe that all man-made laws—legal edicts—

which go beyond codifying and complementing the moral law serve not to bind men together but to spread them asunder, creating chaos rather than harmony, tyranny rather than peaceful order.

Fundamental to my faith is the rejection of government as the *sovereign* power. This puts me on the side of the writers of the Declaration of Independence. . . . By proclaiming the Creator as the endower of men's rights, they proclaimed the Creator as sovereign, denying government that ancient and medieval role. Moralists!

. . . Moral values [are] the correct vantage point from which to look for improvement, refinement. . . .

What are the foundations of morality? . . . My foundations are the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments. The Golden Rule, in my view, is the prime tenet of sound economics and, doubtless, the oldest ethical proposition of distinctly universal character. Let no one do to others that which he would not have them do to him; that would be just about the ideal, economically, socially, morally, ethically. . . .

There are moral values which are appropriately reinforced by man-made law, and other moral values which do not lend themselves to legal implementation. Let us examine the Ten Commandments to find where man-made laws are appropriate, that is, where they are complementary to the moral law, and where not.

Man-made laws—legal edicts backed by force—are inappropriate when directed at what the individual thinks or believes or does to himself. A man's inner life can only be impaired, never improved, by coercive forces. Government is but an arm of society and its only proper role is to codify and inhibit injuries inflicted on society, that is, on others than self. Self-injury is subject to self-correction—none other!

Take the Commandment, "Thou shalt not covet." Enforce this by a man-made law? The absurdity is obvious. Envy is the root of many evils—stealing, killing, and the like—yet it cannot be done away with by the gun, billy club, fist, or any other physical force. . . . The you's and I's—

society—may lament the ills many people inflict on themselves but we cannot correct them by legal concoctions.

The moralist concedes that there is good and evil in the world . . . that there is a moral law by which one may distinguish the good from the evil. But he knows that he is powerless to relieve any individual of the certain consequences of that person's immoral actions. . . . Such human enactments would be inconsistent with the moral laws of cause and consequence—would indeed be a form of tyranny, an invitation to lawlessness in the mistaken belief that one might violate the moral law with impunity.

. . . Government out of bounds, minding your and my business. . . . Law? Not the way a moralist would define it! These are tyrannies.

Clearly, the moral law takes precedence over the legal edicts of civil law. The latter serves a useful purpose *provided* its limited role is understood and heeded. When statutory law invades the domain of the moral law, it is itself ineffective and it paralyzes moral action. . . .

Coercively enforce an observation of the Golden Rule when only self-enforcement is possible? Nonsensical! Can the government stop covetousness by making it illegal? Of course not! The role of civil law should be limited exclusively to inhibiting such injuries as some inflict on others, never directed at injuries we inflict on ourselves.

My moral code is founded on the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments, and I would call upon the civil law to help enforce only these: "Thou shalt not kill," "Thou shalt not steal," and "Thou shalt not bear false witness."

. . . Each of these evils inflicts injuries on others and thus becomes a societal problem. Such destructive behavior should be inhibited, insofar as possible, by the organized and legal arm of society—government.

All . . . stand against the murder of one by another . . .

. . . Killings by the millions is not so much frowned upon. Why? These are done in the name of a collective. . . . I didn't do it; the nation (or some other abstraction) did it! . . . What is the explanation for this calamitous trend? In

> my view, omnipotent government, that is, government, not the Creator, as sovereign.
>
> . . . Not one in a thousand would steal a penny. . . . Full respect for private property at the you-and-me level! Yet, people by the millions will ask the government to do the taking for them. . . . Plunder at the impersonal level! Why? The same old reason: government out of bounds, that is, government as sovereign. . . .
>
> Those who cherish liberty are well advised to respect and defend the rightful claims of others. . . . Observe that "Thou shalt not steal" presupposes private ownership, the bedrock or foundation of individual liberty. . . . *To disregard this moral law is to deny being one's own man*. . . . Merely observe how the fruits of individual effort are increasingly expropriated by the collective, how our options of ownership are being diminished. And the way to reverse this dreadful trend is to heed the Commandment against theft. Government's role here, as in the case of murder, is to inhibit these infractions of the moral law, not to promote them.
>
> "Thou shalt not bear false witness" means not to misrepresent or defraud or falsify. Make a contract, keep it. Let all representations be truthful. . . . False witness, having to do with injury to others, rationally warrants that the civil law help rescue us from this evil.

Leonard Read urges a return to government in which legislative law is a complement that supports the moral law rather than a substitute that undermines it. In doing so, he echoes our founders' increasingly abandoned views as well as those who shared those views after the founding, such as Henry David Thoreau, who writes, "Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience then? I think we should be men first, and subjects afterwards" (Thoreau 1849).

The complexity of our modern world often disguises foundational questions, cloaking, for example, the vast difference between, on the one hand, the small logically defensible role of government in our lives and liberties and, on the other hand, the reality of a nearly omnipresent government. Leonard Read, following a distinguished line of forebears, sees that

the result does not benefit citizens but instead undermines moral law and, as a result, society. His conclusion bears repeating:

> To my way of thinking, morality, once shattered, destroys the people and whoever or whatever presumes to rule. It is only the *consciousness* of moral obligations that binds men together.

79.

Compromise or Surrender?

Compromise is frequently the lubricant of successful social interaction, and its rhetoric is a staple for politicians who want to "get things done." But political compromises are different from most day-to-day compromises because they often abandon moral principles. For example, there are huge differences between market compromises—flexible, voluntary compromises by all whose rights are affected—and political compromises—arrangements where just over half the participants compromise on an agreement to coerce others.

In "Penalty of Surrender," from his 1974 book *Having My Way* (Read 1974), Leonard Read argues for the importance of distinguishing the moral compromises involved in politics from other kinds of compromises. Since this distinction is all but ignored today, his analysis bears reconsideration.

> The compromising attitude is exalted by many and deplored by only a few. Most current discussions are tempered with concepts of compromise and expediency.
>
> Compromise, like many other words, has different meanings for different persons. I want to use the term in the sense of one of the definitions given by Webster: "The result or embodiment of concession or adjustment." I wish to show that compromise is potentially good when applied in a physical sense and that it has no application whatever in a moral sense. . . .
>
> Compromise in this sense [of] adjustment of physical situations . . . is the process by which conflicts are reduced to the point most satisfactory to all parties concerned. When thought of in this way, compromise is the great harmonizer, the attitude that makes living together—social life—a pleasure.
>
> Indeed, the marketplace of willing exchange where tens of millions of transactions go on daily is one vast area of compromise. Buyers aim at low prices. Sellers aim at high prices. In a free market, unhampered by private thieves and political restrictions, there is an adjustment of these diverse desires. Compromise establishes the price at

which the mutual satisfaction of buyer and seller is at its highest level.

It is in the physical realm that most of our daily life is lived. In this realm compromise is good and it is practical. It begets harmony and peace.

How easy it would seem then, finding compromise so useful in such a vast segment of life, to conclude thoughtlessly that it has an equal place, a comparable value, in that phase of life which consciously occupies little of our thoughts: moral life.

. . . What is compromise in physical affairs—that is, in an adjustment of physical positions—is something entirely different when applied to principles and morality.

For example, let us make the reckless assumption that most of us are committed to the Biblical injunction, "Thou shalt not steal." This is based on the moral principle that each person has the right to the fruits of his own labor. The point I wish to make—my major point—is that this *as a principle* defies compromise. You either take someone else's property without his consent, or you do not. If you steal just a bit—a penny—you do not compromise the principle; you abandon it. You surrender your principle.

By taking only a *little* of someone's property without his consent, as distinguished from taking a lot, you do compromise in the physical sense the amount you steal. But the moral principle, whatever the amount of the theft, is surrendered and utterly abandoned.

If all the rest of mankind is in favor of passing a law that would take the property, honestly acquired, of only one person against his will, even though the purpose be allegedly for the so-called social good, I cannot adjust myself both to the moral injunction, "Thou shalt not steal," and to the demand of the millions. Principle does not lend itself to bending or to compromising. It stands impregnable. I must either abide by it, or in all fairness, I must on this point regard myself as an inconsistent, unprincipled person rather than a rational, reasonable, logical one. . . .

The correctness of a principle has little to do with the intensity of conviction with which a man holds it. . . . But

there is another type of difference which is more pertinent to the point of this essay: the difference between those who accept unyieldingly a moral principle as their standard, and those who accept a principle watered down by "practical" considerations. Lord Morley warned of this danger when he deplored the tendency to forget the principle itself in our preoccupation with the practical difficulties of applying it.

To me, "Thou shalt not steal," is a principled injunction, not alone because some sage of antiquity said so, but largely because my own experience has compelled me to adopt this as a principle of right conduct which must be adhered to if I am not to destroy my own integrity, and if I am to live peacefully with my fellow men.

To those of opposite judgments, who believe that they should gratify their personal charitable instincts not with their own goods, but with goods extorted from others by the police force, who fail to see how thieving damages integrity, and who accept the practice of political plunder as right and honorable—to them, "Thou shalt not steal" must appear wrong in principle.

. . . Aristotle claimed that there were a million ways to be wrong; only one way to be right. How easy for fallible beings to decide on a wrong way!

. . . More fundamental, however, than anything else is intellectual integrity. . . .

Intellectual integrity simply means to reflect in word and in deed, always and accurately, that which one believes to be right. Integrity cannot be compromised. It is either practiced or not practiced. . . .

All the world is filled with examples of surrendered principles: men who know practically nothing about themselves trying to play God, attempting to control and forcibly direct the creative actions of others; . . . expediency substituting for the dictates of conscience; businessmen employing "experts" to help them *seem* right, often at the expense of rightness itself; labor leaders justifying any action that gratifies their lust for power; political leaders operating on the premise that the end justifies the means; clergymen preaching expropriation of property without

consent in the name of the "common good"; teachers not explaining but advocating coercive collectivism; aspirants to public office building platforms from public opinion polls; farmers, miners, and other plunderbundists uniting with the police force to siphon unto themselves the fruits of others' labor; arrogance replacing humility; in short, surrender of principle appears to be the distinguishing mark of our time. . . .

. . . These ideas born of surrendered principles are the most dangerous vandals known to man. . . . Note the extent to which the organized police force—government—promotes and enacts plunder rather than inhibits it. . . .

. . . The danger lies . . . in settling for less than one's best judgment.

Does it take courage to be honest? Does one have to be brave to express the truth as he sees it? Indeed, *it is not dangerous to be honest*, but rather a mark of intelligence. Being honest and adhering to principle requires intelligence more than courage. . . .

Finally, some may contend that even if everyone were a model of intellectual integrity, by reason of the great variety of judgments, differences would still remain. This is true. But differences lead in the direction of truth in an atmosphere of honesty. Honest differences are livable differences.

Life in a physical sense is a compromise. . . . But when vast numbers of people surrender living by what they believe to be right, it follows that they must then live by what they believe to be wrong. No more destructive tendency can be imagined.

Honesty—each person true to his highest conscience—is the condition from which revelation springs; from which knowledge expands; from which intelligence grows; from which judgments improve. It is a never-ending, eternally challenging—a thoroughly joyous process. Indeed, it *is* living in its highest sense.

Read recognizes the huge gap between market compromises and moral compromises. Offering more money or accepting less to consummate a transaction is a compromise that violates no moral principles. But unlike

prices, which allow marginal adjustments, compromising moral principles means abandoning them. "Thou shall not steal" prohibits compromises between those who don't want to steal and those who do. If government were not the very perpetrator of such compromises, it would punish them as criminal. No inalienable rights can be compromised without being abandoned.

Market compromises require secure property rights—that is, the power of the owner to determine an asset's disposition. Anyone else who wishes to control that choice must come to an agreement with the owner, who is thereby protected from a vast range of extortion and expropriation. There are vast societal benefits in compromising with all whose rights are involved if involuntary burden is avoided.

The compromises that advance our well-being and improve social coordination are those that defend property rights and market mechanisms. Unfortunately, politicians typically propose compromises that violate the rights that benefit us all. But, as Read observes, such abuses demonstrate that the kind of compromise that can advance Americans' interests are those we make for ourselves without violating others' rights.

80.

A Better Way to "Buy American"

Samuel Johnson once wrote that "patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel" (Boswell 1791). He was wrong: patriotism is the last refuge of many scoundrels.

This was well illustrated by the political furor over Team USA uniforms being made in China for the 2012 Summer Olympics. Many politicians asserted that it was un-American. Senate majority leader Harry Reid said the uniforms should be burned. Supposedly, there were immediate patriotic pressures to mandate "buying American," and Ralph Lauren quickly capitulated, promising to "go and sin no more."

While some details of this flap are unusual, protectionism dressed up as patriotism follows a well-worn script. Domestic producers harmed by imports seek protection from their superior competitors and lead the patriotism bandwagon with calls to "buy American." The Team USA case exploited the pro-American sentiment hovering around the Olympics, but the claims made no more sense than an argument that we should grow our own coffee and bananas for American athletes.

Imports always harm competing domestic producers, so the patriotism argument can be used as political cover whenever they get the government's ear. And there are always politicians ready to listen.

Leonard Read recognizes the abuses and illogic of this approach in "Buy American," from his 1974 book *Having My Way* (Read 1974), where he lays out a better way to approach the issue.

> The admonition to "Buy American" has two diametrically opposed meanings. The first is its popular and mischievous meaning—shun goods produced in foreign countries. The second, and loftier meaning embodied in these words, is rarely mentioned or thought of—shun principles and practices alien to the American dream of limited government and personal freedom.
>
> Producers who plead with consumers to "Buy American" are appealing to blind patriotism. Buy my product because it is made here; heed not its price or quality. This is sheer chauvinism. Suppose I were to urge your acceptance

> of my ideas, rather than those of Marx or Machiavelli, merely because of our differing nationalities. The absurdity of such an appeal is obvious: neither goods nor ideas are properly judged in this fashion; geographical origin has nothing to do with the matter.

Read points out that the traditional use of the slogan "Buy American" is to justify the rejection of foreign goods rather than something that advances our general welfare. But there is an interpretation under which it does advance our general welfare: Don't buy—that is, accept and make use of—actions that violate the American principle of freedom to choose productive associations that don't violate the inalienable rights of others.

For Read, whether a principle is true or not has nothing to do with where it comes from. Ad hominem, or "against the man," attacks, for example, do nothing to invalidate something that is true, no matter how often political rhetoric may try to make that case. As a result, he offers an excellent way to test whether a general principle is valid: change "Buy American" to "Buy Chinese" or "Buy Mexican," and ask Americans if, based on their patriotism, they think the proposition is a good one to follow.

If it is a general principle, it should be as valid for whoever deals with us as their supplier as it is for ourselves when we deal with our suppliers. We would support the protectionism of others as much as our own. But if it is only special pleading, rather than a general principle, then we can expect people to answer differently for themselves than for others, just as people hypocritically attack other countries for their protectionism while defending their own as principled.

Read also recognizes that the extent of protectionism goes far beyond international trade: "All obstacles to competition, be they foreign or domestic, are but variants of this theme." There is only a difference of degree between, on the one hand, a ban on buying a foreign country's products and, on the other hand, imposing tariffs, quotas, or any of a host of nontariff barriers. Whether it benefits or harms Americans does not change—only the degree. Similarly, change "Buy American" to "Buy Local" (a common slogan of locavore campaigns in agriculture), and the logic is equally invalid.

If you change the wording to "Buy Union," essentially the message of labor agreements and prevailing wage laws, the logic remains the same. Union members are protected from the competition of those who would work for less, but their protection harms both nonunion workers and the

customers who must now pay more for the product. For the same reason, price controls are also a form of protectionism. A minimum wage, for example, protects workers from competing with those willing to work for less but harms those denied employment as well as consumers.

Most antitrust cases are also forms of protectionism. They are not brought by consumers—who generally gain from the practices being challenged—but by outcompeted rivals who want to take away the advantages of the other firm—advantages passed on to customers. Outcompeted rivals don't want their potential customers to go elsewhere, so they use antitrust laws to restrict consumer access to superior options.

Many licensing schemes follow the same protectionist pattern. They hide behind masks of quality or safety but primarily keep out new competitors who might offer lower-quality options at lower prices.

Leonard Read offers a powerful solution, powerfully illustrated by America's own past.

> Enough of this mischievous notion. Let us try instead to appreciate and "buy" the American ideal of freedom. . . .
>
> Ralph Waldo Emerson had this to say:
>
> > America is another name for opportunity. Our whole history appears like a last effort of divine Providence in behalf of the human race. . . .
>
> As to the best in political economy, consider the Constitution of the United States. Regardless of its several flaws, no other nation's charter has equaled it in an economic sense. In what respect is this distinctively American? Here is the answer:
>
> > No state shall without the consent of the Congress, lay any imposts on imports and exports. . . .
>
> In a nutshell, no tariffs, quotas, embargoes between the several states. . . . The world has never known a free trade area as large as the U.S.A. when measured in value of goods and services produced and exchanged. Never perfectly free, but the nearest approximation to freedom!

The freedom to associate for productive purposes however and with whomever one chooses was the essence of the American miracle. Under that principle, people were protected from many of its violations that other governments had imposed throughout history. It was, at its heart, as Thomas Jefferson wrote in a letter, April 6, 1816, "the first principle of association,

the guarantee to everyone of the free exercise of his industry and the fruits acquired by it" (Jefferson 1905).

Read's understanding of America's free internal trade offers a counterpoint to those who, defending protectionism as a valid principle, claim that it was the protectionism adopted by the United States in the form of tariffs that made possible our staggering early economic success. While it is true that import tariffs were imposed, and eventually dramatically raised (see the "Tariff of Abominations"), they were not the source of our success any more than hurdles should be given credit for increasing running speeds. The reality is that the positive impact of our massive internal free-trade zone and other constitutional restrictions on government interference far outweighed the negative impact of international trade restrictions.

> Read addresses a common defense of protectionism: the "infant industry" argument that free trade may be good in general but that industries must be protected until they can grow to a scale where they can compete. This amounts to a claim that enjoying the benefits of freedom requires restricting the freedom that generates them. "In reality, it is competition which protects "infant industries"; it protects them from stagnation and persuades them to grow. In the absence of competition and freedom of transactions, producers stagnate. It is only when others are doing better that one attempts to overcome, to gain strength. Competition, combined with free exchange, makes strong giants out of weak infants—this is the password to economic opportunity and well-being—an American idea well worth buying."

From the perspective of consumers, competition that takes place without artificial assistance or restriction expands their options the most. It does not matter whether competition leads to a foreign producer offering better terms because of superior efficiencies or to an American producer. There is no reason to artificially nurture American infant industries, because it is the results of real superiority that benefit consumers. Artificially tilting the playing field only inhibits the best process for discovering and passing on the gains of such superiority.

If we accept protectionism in principle, we should be for it in all cases. But, as Read notes, we are all free traders when it benefits us. We recognize that we gain from free trade except when we benefit by special treatment—necessarily at an even greater cost to others. We abandon our own revealed

preference for freedom only when bribed with something stolen from others.

> Regardless of all the noisy arguments to the contrary, everyone known to me favors both competition and free trade. Name one who does not favor competition among those from whom he buys. Logically, then, how can one favor competition among millions of others and be against it for himself! This is irrationality, not disagreement.
>
> Precisely the same can be said for free trade—domestic or foreign. Name one who would not welcome an order for his products from another country or county. Everyone favors exports. Imports? Favoring exports and objecting to imports is the same as favoring selling and objecting to being paid. This is an absurdity, not disagreement.

Leonard Read demonstrates that the logic of protectionism is riddled with errors and that the practice of protectionism, in its myriad forms, is theft that impoverishes everyone except those bribed with protected status and those whose political clout greases the wheels. It is a far cry from either liberty or justice for all.

> What then is meant by "Buy American" in its proper sense? Let willing exchange prevail among all people, locally and worldwide. Let each buyer or seller be guided by his own scale of values. Sell the American way and buy the American way—not as presently practiced, but as once prevailed and ought to be reinstituted. Keep ours the land of opportunity for everyone.

81.

Why Not Private Mail Delivery?

The US Postal Service has long bathed itself in billions of dollars of red ink. And the slide seems to be worsening. There have been many proposed "reforms," which Adam Summers described as "higher prices, slower delivery, fewer delivery days, and more junk mail" (Summers 2012). But even efforts intended to create efficiencies, such as closing distribution centers, must navigate a minefield of politicians intent on ensuring that any cuts fall in someone else's district.

Despite abysmal and unsustainable results, there have been virtually no serious efforts to put an end to the postal service's monopoly on first-class mail and allow private providers to compete to provide the best services at the best prices. Competition has a long record of success with countless products and services, and history shows the same success is possible for postal services. As Summers summarized, "Several other private mail entrepreneurs sprouted up from about 1839–1851. . . . [While] they were eventually shut down by the government, they proved that private mail delivery was possible. And the competition they provided forced the government to drastically reduce its prices in the process."

Summers brings up an important question. Why don't people today even think of allowing postal competition? What makes us so blind to such a possibility? He is not the first to ask that question. Leonard Read, a tireless advocate of the "freedom philosophy," discusses the postal monopoly in several of his writings. The current meltdown of the postal system makes it worth revisiting his discussion. Consider his insights from "Pre-emptors: Agents of Destruction," from his 1976 book *Comes the Dawn* (Read 1976a), and "Causes of Authoritarianism," from his 1958 book *Why Not Try Freedom?* (Read 1958).

From "Pre-emptors: Agents of Destruction":

> Any time any activity is preempted, all thought as to how it would be conducted by free and self-responsible people is deadened. . . .
>
> Our postal system is a socialistic institution. . . . Its record? As all users know, a dramatic increase in rates,

enormous deficits mounting annually, and service deteriorating rather than improving.

Observe the effect of this pre-emption: no intelligent thought of what this type of communication would be like among a free and self-responsible people. . . . There are many among us . . . without the slightest idea of what the freedom alternative would be. Why this blindness as to the results of freedom? The answer is: the actions of free men are quite impossible to foresee!

It is one thing to believe that competition affords more efficient service than does a monopoly. Indeed, this very belief is implicit in the arguments of government officials who refuse to permit private delivery of mail: the U.S. Postal Service couldn't stand the competition; someone else would do it more efficiently and at less cost to the customer. But as long as the monopoly is coercively maintained, there is no legal way to prove that the cost of performing an identical service would be lower under competition—or how much lower. Nor can it be proved beyond doubt that competitive private enterprise would indeed perform precisely the same services now available through the Postal monopoly.

But this is the whole point of anyone who believes in the blessings of competition as the most efficient way to provide the goods and services customers are willing and able to pay for. Such faith must concede that no one knows or can know in advance just the form in which the postal service would emerge and develop were everyone free to devote his own ingenuity and time and scarce resources toward serving the ever-changing demands of willing customers in a free market.

If all those changing conditions could be foreseen by any one individual, there is no logical reason why he could not make socialism work. But that is the whole case against socialism and for competitive private enterprise: the unknown is not foreseeable or predictable with certainty; conditions change, and freedom affords us the best possible chance to cope with those changes. If one believes the Postal monopoly should be abolished, it is in part because

he has witnessed miraculous market developments in the delivery of items other than mail.

Take voice delivery. How far could the human voice be delivered prior to the beginning of the Bell system? . . . [Now—through] *the miracle of the market—around* the earth . . . at the speed of light. . . . Those who find this not particularly amazing are nonetheless reluctant to entrust the delivery of mail to the unhampered and unpredictable ingenuity of a free and self-responsible people! . . .

Why this fear to try—this lack of faith in the potential wonders that might be ours? There are at least two reasons: (1) we cannot foresee the unknown and, thus, we are not attracted to the unimaginable, and (2) the moment a miracle is wrought, we take it as much for granted as the air we breathe. . . . We no longer give it a second thought. . . .

Years ago, I observed that no person knows how to make such a "simple" thing as an ordinary wooden lead pencil. Yet, that year, we made 1,600,000,000 pencils in the U.S.A. Were we to grasp this single miracle of the free market, we would know that there is not a person who knows how to operate a postal service. . . .

Why, then, does the Free Society work its wonders? Why, when no one knows how to make a pencil, do we have such a proliferation of goods and services? . . . *Ideas by everyone—are free to flow*! . . . Ideas configurate and show forth in everything from billions of pencils to jet planes. . . .

. . . But most people fail to generate ideas on activities that have been pre-empted.

From "Causes of Authoritarianism":

As the belief grows that coercion is the only practical way to get things done . . . belief in the competence of man acting privately, freely, voluntarily, competitively, cooperatively declines. As the former increases, the latter decreases.

In the U.S.A., for example, government has a monopoly of mail delivery. Ask citizens if government should do this and most of them will reply in the affirmative. Why? Simply because government has pre-empted this activity for so many decades that all enterprisers have ceased to think how mail could be delivered were it a private

> enterprise opportunity. Indeed, most of them have come to believe that private enterprise would be wholly incapable of effective mail service. Yet, I note that each day we deliver more pounds of milk than mail. Further, milk is more perishable than a love letter, a catalogue, or an appeal for funds. We also note that the delivery of milk is more prompt and less costly to us than is the delivery of mail.
>
> I ask myself, then, why shouldn't private enterprise deliver mail? Private enterprise delivers freight. . . .
>
> But, no; my countrymen have lost faith in man's ability, acting freely, to deliver letters. . . . Men who do such fantastic things have lost faith in themselves to do the simple chore of letter delivery.

Today, even the massive and accelerating failure of the US Postal Service seems unable to overcome Americans' pervasive blindness to the potential benefits of competition. This would confirm Leonard Read's insight that when the ideas and benefits of freedom are preempted, people lose the belief that a free society can do what has been coercively crowded out by government. "A decline in faith in free men and what they can accomplish results in a rising faith in disastrous authoritarianism."

The current postal situation offers a chance to rethink what many have thoughtlessly come to believe is a natural or necessary function of government. Because the government provides the service now, people do not see how it could be provided without coercion. Not only is real competition a valid alternative, despite our inability to know in advance precisely what it would look like, but it would also be far superior, if the history of freedom is any guide.

82.

On Thinking for Self

After the 2012 reelection of a president favoring dramatically expanded statism, in a race that many on the other side viewed as a crucial referendum on the future of America, the "losers" fought about what lessons needed to be learned for future success. They reached little apparent agreement beyond the importance of pointing fingers at others.

This is not the first instance of navel-gazing about how to resurrect a party's political fortunes, but it is easy to miss a central insight about it—electoral results reflect what people demand. Until those who have no problem robbing Peter to pay Paul are convinced that expanded freedom will improve their prospects, those they elect will change in name but not in substance. The only ultimate "solution" is for enough Americans to discover or rediscover our country's founding principles, a daunting task in a political world that has become saturated with lying and misrepresentation. But the first step in any such renaissance, as Leonard Read points out in "On Thinking for Self," from his 1968 book *Accent on the Right* (Read 1968), is for people to think for themselves.

> What a fearful thought—if this situation is general: a nation of people the vast majority of whom do no thinking for themselves in the area of political economy! Positions on matters of the deepest social import formed from nothing more profound than radio, TV, and newspaper commentaries, or casual, off-the-cuff opinions, or the outpourings of popularity seekers! . . .
>
> Market demand . . . determines the kinds of persons who vie with each other for political office.
>
> Assume a people who do no thinking for themselves. Theirs is a stunted skepticism. Such people only react and are easy prey of the cliche, the plausibility, the shallow promise, the lie. Emotional appeals and pretty words are their only guidelines. The market is made up of no-thinks. Statesmen—men of integrity and intellectual stature—are hopelessly out of demand. When this is the situation, such statesmen will not be found among the politically active.

And who may we expect to respond to a market where thinking for self is absent? Charlatans! Word mongers! Power seekers! Deception artists! . . . The worst rise to the political top. And when our only choice is "the lesser of two evils," voting is a sham.

Now assume a society of persons who do their own thinking and, as a consequence, possess a healthy and intelligent skepticism, persons who cannot be "taken in," hardheaded students of political economy graced with moral rectitude. The market for charlatans is dead. . . . Instead, we find statesmen of character and integrity vying for political office.

. . . Merely keep in mind that whatever shows forth on the political horizon is the response to the market, an echoing or mirroring of the preponderant mode in thinking. When thinking for self is declining, more charlatans and fewer statesmen will vie for office. . . . So, blame not the political opportunists for the state of the nation. Our failure to think for ourselves put them there—indeed, brought them into being. For we are the market; they are but the reflections!

. . . Approximately 50 per cent of those who do not think for themselves are furious with what they see on the political horizon—which is but their own reflections! And to assuage their discontent they exert vigorous effort to change the reflection. . . . As should be expected, they get no more for their pains than new faces masking mentalities remarkably similar to those unseated. It cannot be otherwise.

No improving trend on the political horizon is possible except as there is an improvement—quantity and quality—in thinking for self. Thus, it is of the utmost importance that we seriously attend to our thinking. . . .

Given the present situation, where government is recklessly out of bounds and has its hand in practically every aspect of life, the well-informed citizen is expected to know all about everything. . . . Most of these so-called national or world problems are of similar origin and nature—each one trying to manage everyone's business but his own . . . [a] hopelessly impossible challenge. . . . No *person on the face of the earth knows how to make socialism work*. And don't try!

Instead, concentrate the thinking on what the principled and proper scope of government really is. This is easily within the realm of any reasonably intelligent person, and is first of all the kind of thinking for self in political economy one should cover. All else—welfare, security, prosperity—is in the realm of the free market: you to your affairs, me to mine.

Most individuals who have abandoned thinking for self in matters of political economy are unaware that they thus dry up the source of Creative Wisdom. Such wisdom as society requires does not and cannot exist in any one person . . . [but only in] your and my disparate wisdoms. . . .

There are obstacles, of course, on this path to wisdom. One is a lack of faith in an over-all wisdom representing a coalescence of tiny bits of individual understanding. . . . It cannot be seen with the eye; it can be apprehended only by abstract thinking. . . . Yet, this is the nature of knowledge in society and it behooves each of us to make the best of it.

. . . A good society cannot be developed except through the process of thinking for self. Until such introspection becomes as natural as eating and breathing, there is little prospect for the good life.

. . . Each to his own thinking! The rule, therefore, is not to take somebody else's word for it. . . . *Don't take my word for it*! Scarcely any self-anointed seer or prophet wants to go that far; but, unless he will, write him off as an intellectual authoritarian, a be-like-me god.

. . . Indeed, one who would think for himself should look not only among his contemporaries but also among his predecessors, even among the ancients, for any bits of wisdom that can be garnered. Take full advantage of one's environment, experience, and heritage, but let each thoughtfully do his own selecting, evaluating, and reasoning.

To trust this Creative Wisdom reflects an abiding faith in self and in all free men. . . . But don't take my word for it; think that one through for yourself.

As Read so often emphasizes, the way toward social improvement is not through forcing what one sees as improvement on others but through self-improvement. When it comes to politics, an essential aspect of such improvement is careful thinking. Read saw that without careful thinking, statism, with its alluring but ultimately undeliverable promises of something for nothing, is a virtual certainty. But, for Read, the case for individual liberty is so strong that people who really think for themselves will inevitably discover it. With each such discovery comes self-reform, and self-reform leads to reduced demands for political charlatans' snake oil. In this way, the only kind of "social reform" that constitutes real social advancement becomes possible.

83.

On That Day Began Lies

Whether we are talking about city councils, state legislatures, the House of Representatives, the Senate, committees and subcommittees, or any group organized and designed to influence these, our lives are more and more dictated by government and less and less by our voluntary choices. The adverse consequences of that shift from self-responsibility to irresponsibility can be seen all around us.

One of the most insightful recognitions of these consequences comes from Leo Tolstoy. He observes a movement away from choices based on individual discovery of truth and toward group decisions based on misrepresentations of truth and morality. "From the day when the first members of councils placed exterior authority higher than interior, that is to say, recognized the decisions of men united in councils as more important and more sacred than reason and conscience; on that day began lies that caused the loss of millions of human beings and which continue their unhappy work to the present day."

The Tolstoy quote heads Leonard Read's "On That Day Began Lies" (Read 1952), from his 1952 book *Essays on Liberty*, which digs deep into the question of the "lies" that replace truth when the determinations of councils replace individual choices.

> Accept Tolstoy's statement as a hypothesis and examine . . . the idea that lies begin with "decisions of men united in councils as more important and more sacred than reason and conscience." For, certainly, today, much of the decision that guides national and world policy springs from "men united in councils." . . .
>
> Persons advocate proposals in association that they would in no circumstance practice in individual action. Honest men, by any of the common standards of honesty, will, in a board or a committee, sponsor, for instance, legal thievery—that is, they will urge the use of the political means to exact the fruits of the labor of others for the purpose of benefiting themselves, their group, or their community.

Such legal thievery—what Franz Oppenheimer calls "the political means," as opposed to "the economic means," of mutually voluntary arrangements (Oppenheimer 1919)—occurs in large part because it goes unrecognized not only by councils but also by the public.

> These leaders, for they have been elected or appointed to a board or a committee, do not think of themselves as having sponsored legal thievery. They think of the board, the committee, the council, or the association as having taken the action. . . .
>
> It ought to be obvious that we as individuals stand responsible for our actions regardless of any wishes to the contrary, or irrespective of the devices we try to arrange to avoid personal responsibility. Actions of the group character . . . are lies for in no sense are they accurate responses to the highest judgments of the individuals concerned.

Read then illustrates the sorts of lies or misrepresentations involved.

> [Consider] this not uncommon situation . . . of men honestly holding three irreconcilable beliefs. Yet, a report is expected and under the customary committee theory and practice is usually forthcoming. What to do? Why not hit upon something that is not too disagreeable to any one of the three? . . .
>
> In this hypothetical but common instance the recommendation is a fabrication, pure and simple. Truth, as understood by any one of the three, has no spokesman. By any reasonable definition a lie has been told.
>
> Another example. Three men having no preconceived ideas are appointed to bring in a report. What will they agree to? Only that which they are willing to say in concert which, logically, can be only the lowest common-denominator opinion of the majority! The lowest common-denominator opinion of two persons cannot be an accurate reflection of the highest judgment of each of the two. The lowest common-denominator opinion of a set of men is at variance with truth as here defined. Again, it is a fabrication. Truth has no spokesman. A lie has been told. . . .
>
> . . . The true committee, the arrangement which calls for resolution in accordance with what a majority of the

> members are willing to say in concert, is but the instigator of fabrications yet more pronounced. The committee, for the most part, presupposes another larger body to which its recommendations are made.
>
> These larger bodies have a vast, almost an all-inclusive, range in present-day American life. . . .
>
> . . . Any one of the millions of citizens who participates in these associations has, by experience, learned how extensive these fabrications are. As a matter of fact, there has developed a rather large acceptance of the notion that wisdom can be derived from the averaging of opinions. . . . The quantitative theory of wisdom, so to speak!
>
> . . . Observe how the lie is compounded.
>
> . . . An association takes a stand on a certain issue and claims or implies it speaks for its 1,000,000 members. It is possible, of course, that each of the 1,000,000 members agrees with the stand taken by the organization. But, in all probability, this is an untruthful statement. . . .
>
> . . . [Typically] the opinion of the members was not tested at all. The officers, or some committee, or some one person may have determined the stand of the organization. Then there is no certainty that more than one person (or a majority of the committee) favored that position. . . .
>
> . . . As everyone who has had experience in associational work can attest, what really happens is a misrepresentation of concurrence, a program of lying about how many of who stands for what. Truth, such as is known, is seldom spoken. It is warped into a misleading distortion. It is obliterated by this process of the majority speaking for the minority, more often by the minority speaking for the majority, sometimes by one dishonest opportunist speaking for thousands. Truth, such as is known—the best judgments of individuals—for the most part, goes unrepresented, unspoken.
>
> This, then, is the stuff out of which much of local, national, and world policy is being woven.

He then asks, "Is it any wonder that many citizens are confused?" There is a cognitive dissonance between, on the one hand, the common destruction of individual truth by group decision-making and, on the other hand,

the presumption that such decision-making represents majority rule. The real troubles of society grow from that confusion.

> First, there doesn't appear to be any widespread, lively recognition of the fact that conscience, reason, knowledge, integrity, fidelity, understanding, judgment, and other virtues are the distinctive and exclusive properties of individual persons.
>
> Somehow, there follows from this lack of recognition the notion that wisdom can be derived by pooling the conclusions of a sufficient number of persons, even though no one of them has applied his faculties to the problems in question. With this as a notion the imagination begins to ascribe personal characteristics to a collective—the committee, the group, the association—as though the collective could think, judge, know, or assume responsibility. With this as a notion, there is the inclination to substitute the "decisions of men united in councils" for reason and conscience. With this as a notion, the responsibility for personal thought is relieved and, thus relieved, fails to materialize to its fullest.

Read also sees that to voluntarily leave certain groups offers a way for individuals to escape the distortion of their views. If we respect the constitutional limits that are supposed to constrain government and protect life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, then coercive councils will lose their ability to distort our views. But if we allow government to flood past constitutional levees against its power and reach, then distortions of truth and imposed burdens will multiply.

> There is an almost blind faith in the efficacy and rightness of majority decision as though the mere preponderance of opinion were the device for determining what is right. This thinking is consistent with and a part of the "might makes right" doctrine. This thinking, no doubt, is an outgrowth of the American political pattern, lacking, it seems, an observance of the essential distinctions between voluntary and coercive agencies. It is necessary that these distinctions be understood unless the whole associational error is to continue. . . .

> Government—organized police force—which according to best American theory should have a monopoly of coercive power, must contain a final authority. Such authority was not planned to be in the person of a monarch, in an oligarchy, or even in a set of elected representatives. The ultimate, final authority was designed to derive from and to reside with the people. Erected as safeguards against the despotism that such a democratic arrangement is almost certain to inflict on its members were (1) the Constitution and (2) the legislative, executive, and judicial functions so divided and diffused that each might serve as a check on the others.
>
> When the concession is made that government is necessary to assure justice and maximum freedom, and when the decision is made that the ultimate authority of that government shall rest with the people, it follows that majority vote is not a matter of choice but a necessity whenever this ultimate authority expresses itself. No alternative exists with this situation as a premise.

Read extends that conclusion: when an authority need not enforce a law or policy—that is, when decisions are left to individuals in voluntary arrangements—then there is no need to rely on majority determination.

> Conceding the limitation of the coercive power which was implicit in the American design, the really important matters of life, all of the creative aspects, are outside this coercive sphere and are left to the attentions of men in voluntary effort and free association.
>
> The idea of citizens left free to their home life, their business life, their religious life, with the coercive power limited to protecting citizens in these pursuits presents, roughly, the duality of the American pattern. On the one hand is the really important part of life, the creative part. On the other hand is the minor part, the part having to do with constraint. Constraining and creating call for distinctly different arrangements. Constraint can stop the trains but it is not the force we use to build a railroad.
>
> . . . Without raising questions as to the distinctions between creating and constraining we have taken a coercive-agency device and attempted its application in free association. . . .

> The phase of activities here in dispute has to do with . . . a method by which reason and conscience . . . are actually turned into fabrications, and then represented as the convictions of persons who hold no such convictions.

To close his case on the importance of individuals making their own decisions about the most important matters, Leonard Read asks his readers to make a simple comparison. How much wisdom have we received from groups, and how much have we gleaned from insightful individuals?

> One needs to reflect but a moment on the words of wisdom which have come down to us throughout all history, the words and works that have had the power to live, the words and works around which we have molded much of our lives, and one will recognize that they are the words and works of persons, not collective resolutions, not what men have uttered in concert, not the "decisions of men united in councils."
>
> In short, if effectiveness for what's right is the object then the decision-of-men-united-in-council practice could well be abandoned. . . .
>
> . . . Experience has shown that such perfection as there is exists in individuals, not in the lowest common-denominator expressions of a collection of individuals . . . not with the confusing announcement of verbal amalgams—lies. . . .
>
> How to stop lies? It is simply a matter of personal determination and a resolve to act and speak in strict accordance with one's inner, personal dictate of what is right. And for each of us to see to it that no other man or set of men is given permission to represent us otherwise.

84.

Do Not Vote in the Absence of Integrity

When elections near, campaigns to "get out the vote" move into high gear. Arguments about why you must vote for one of two major-party candidates begin appearing everywhere. But do those argument hold water?

This question of whether to vote is of particular importance to libertarians, given their commitment to freedom. They must ask, "Is voting or not voting more consistent with defending liberty?"

Leonard Read, in "Regardless of Choice, Vote," from his 1964 book *Anything That's Peaceful* (Read 1964a), offers some interesting and unique insights into this question. In particular, he goes beyond counterarguments against the invalid reasons for why one must vote for a major-party candidate, instead offering an affirmative argument for why abstention can be more principled than voting.

Read first responds to the following question: "You would vote for the candidate of one or the other party, regardless of positions, wouldn't you?"

> According to *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, "the existence of only two major parties . . . presupposes general public agreement on constitutional questions and on the aims of government." . . . Under such agreeable circumstances, each party keeps a check on the other, thus giving assurance that neither party will step out of the bounds that have been agreed upon.
>
> . . . The two-party system (1) presupposes a general agreement on constitutional questions and the aims of government and (2) aims at, if it does not presuppose, honest candidates contending for office within the framework of that constitution. In this kind of political order, each office seeker is supposed to present fairly his own capabilities as related to the agreed upon framework, voting being for the purpose of deciding which candidate is more competent for that limited role.
>
> Clearly, the theory as originally conceived did not intend that the positions of candidates should be a response

> to voter opinion polls concerning the content or meaning of the constitution and the aims of government. . . .
>
> If there were "a general public agreement on constitutional questions and on the aims of government," and if candidates were vying with each other for office solely on their competency to perform within this framework, I would have no comment. But there is little contemporary agreement as to constitutional questions and the aims of government!

Here, he adds an important caveat to the analysis. If Americans agreed on the constitutional issues that determine which actions will advance the general welfare, political action would be so narrowly circumscribed that the vote of any given citizen would be virtually unable to harm others, even if it determined the outcome of the election. If we remained within those narrow confines today, whether to vote would not be a serious issue of disagreement. But since that is not the case, voting does cause problems.

> Candidates . . . no longer contend with each other as to their competence to serve within a generally accepted framework but, instead:
>
> (1) they compete to see which one can come up with the most popular alteration of the framework, and
>
> (2) they compete to see which one can get himself in front of the most popular voter grab bag in order to stand four-square for some people's supposed right to other people's income.
>
> . . . Voters are seldom given the chance to decide on the basis of competency, but have only the choice of deciding between opportunists or, a better term, *trimmers*. . . .
>
> . . . Today, trimming is so much in vogue that often a voter cannot cast a ballot except for one of two trimmers. Heard over and over again is the apology, "Well, the only choice I had was to vote for the lesser of two evils. I had to vote for one of them, didn't I?" A moral tragedy is implicit in this confession, as well as a political fallacy; in combination they must eventually lead to economic disaster.

This "lesser of two evils" view implies that voting for the candidate who is less bad than the others must be the most principled choice of the unappetizing options. This seems to be the dominant reasoning behind the "hold your nose and vote" camp. But Read's focus on integrity leads him to a different conclusion.

> It is morally tragic whenever a citizen's only choice is between two wrongdoers—that is, between two trimmers.
>
> A trimmer, according to the dictionary, is one who changes his opinions and policies to suit the occasion. In contemporary political life, he is any candidate whose position on issues depends solely on what he thinks will have most voter appeal. He ignores the dictates of his higher conscience, trims his personal idea of what is morally right, tailors his stand to the popular fancy. Integrity, the accurate reflection in word and deed of that which is thought to be morally right, is sacrificed to expediency. . . .
>
> . . . Why, asks the responsible voter, should I endorse dishonesty by voting for such a candidate? He has . . . forsworn virtue by insisting on bearing false witness. . . . The role of the legislator is to secure our rights to life, liberty, and property—that is, to protect us against fraud, violence, predation, and misrepresentation (false witness). . . .
>
> Such righteousness or virtue as exists in the mind of man does not and cannot manifest itself in the absence of integrity—the honest, accurate reflection in deeds of one's beliefs. . . . It is doubtful if anything contributes more to the diseased condition of society than the diminishing practice of integrity.
>
> Those of us who attach this much importance to integrity must perforce construe trimming as evil. Therefore, when both candidates for public office are judged to be trimmers, the one who trims less than the other is often regarded as "the lesser of two evils." But, is he really?

Read then discusses principles, compromise, trimming, and their relationship to integrity.

> It is murder whether one man is slain, or two. It is stealing whether the amount is ten cents or a thousand dollars. And, a lie is a lie whether told to one person or to a

> million. "Thou shalt not kill"; "Thou shalt not steal"; "Thou shalt not bear false witness" are derived from principles. Principles do not permit of compromise; they are either adhered to or surrendered.
>
> . . . Does the *quantity* of trimming have anything whatsoever to do with the matter? Or, rather, is this not a question of *quality* or character? To trim is to ignore the dictates of higher conscience; it is to take flight from integrity. Is not the candidate who will trim once for one vote likely to trim twice for more votes? Does he not demonstrate by any single act of trimming, regardless of how minor, that he stands ready to abandon the dictates of conscience for the place he seeks in the political sun? Does not the extent or quantity of trimming merely reflect a judgment as to how much trimming is expedient?
>
> If the only question at issue is whether a candidate will trim at all, then trimming is not comparative; thus, it would be incorrect to report, "I cast my ballot for the lesser of two evils." Accuracy would require, "I felt there was no choice except to cast a ballot for one of two men, both of whom have sacrificed integrity for the hope of votes." . . .
>
> . . . When one must choose between men who forsake integrity . . . there is little relief at the polling level except as candidates of integrity may be encouraged by voters of integrity. Impractical idealism? . . . Read Edmund Burke, one of the great statesmen of all time, addressing his constituency:
>
> But his unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you. . . . Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.

Read concludes that integrity is the foundation of representative government that can advance the general welfare of its citizens. Without integrity, electors cannot rely on representatives to represent their interests or even to stop them from actively pursuing policies harmful to their interests. This brings him to the central question: How can candidates of integrity be encouraged by voters (and non-voters) of integrity?

Is it fallacious to believe that responsible citizenship requires casting a ballot for one or the other of two candidates, *regardless of how far the candidates have departed from moral rectitude?*

. . . The obligation to vote at any and all elections, whatever the issues or personalities, is equated with responsible citizenship. . . .

Yet any person who is conscious of our rapid drift toward the omnipotent state can hardly escape the suspicion that there may be a fault in our habitual way of looking at things. . . . So, let us bring the sanctity of voting into the open and take a hard look at it. . . .

Government in the U.S.A. has been pushed far beyond its proper sphere. The Marxian tenet, "from each according to ability, to each according to need," backed by the armed force of the state, has become established policy. . . . Within this kind of political framework, it is to be expected that one candidate will stand for the coercive expropriation of the earned income of all citizens, giving the funds thus gathered to those in groups A, B, and C. Nor need we be surprised that his opponent differs from him only in advocating that the loot be given to those in groups X, Y, and Z. Does responsible citizenship require casting a ballot for either of these political plunderers? The citizen has no significant moral choice but only an immoral choice in the event he has joined the unholy alliance himself and thinks that one of the candidates will deliver some of the largess to him or to a group he favors. In the latter case, the problem is not one of responsible citizenship but of irresponsible looting.

Does responsible citizenship require voting for irresponsible candidates? To ballot in favor of irresponsible candidates as though it were one's duty is to misconstrue the meaning of duty. To cast a ballot for a trimmer, because no man of integrity is offering himself, does as much as one can with a ballot to encourage other trimmers to run for office . . . to urge, as strongly as one can at the polls, that men of integrity not offer themselves as candidates.

Voting in an uninformed, irresponsible way repels those with integrity from politics. Read argues that never voting for a trimmer would not only be responsible but even have the potential to improve American society.

> What would happen if we adopted as a criterion: *Never vote for a trimmer*! . . . Millions of us would not cast ballots. Would the end result of this substantial, nonviolent protest, this large-scale demonstration of "voting by turning our backs," compound our problem? It is difficult to imagine how it could. For a while we would continue to get what we now have: a high percentage of trimmers and plunderers in public office, men who promise privileges in exchange for ballots—and freedom. In time, however, this silent but eloquent refusal to participate might conceivably improve the situation. Men of integrity and high moral quality—statesmen—might show forth. . . .
>
> Would a return to integrity by itself solve our problem? No, for many men of integrity do not understand freedom; or, if they do, are not devoted to it. But it is only among men of integrity that any solution can *begin* to take shape. Such men, at least, will do the right as they see the right. . . . Trimmers and plunderers, on the other hand, are the enemies of morality and freedom by definition. . . .
>
> . . . If respect for a candidate's integrity were widely adopted as a criterion for casting a ballot, millions of us, as matters now stand, would not cast ballots. Yet, in a very practical sense, would not those of us who protest in this manner be voting . . . who, by our conscious and deliberate inaction, proclaim that we have no party. What other choice have we at the polling level? Would not this encourage men of statesmanlike qualities to offer themselves in candidacy?

He then asks why, if it is integrity that matters, the current emphasis is on voting, regardless of the integrity of the candidates, and why integrity is less important now than it was in America's past.

> Why is so much emphasis placed upon voting as a responsibility of citizenship? Why the sanctity attached to voting? Foremost, no doubt, is a carry-over from an all-but-lost ideal in which voting is associated with making choices

> between honest beliefs, between candidates of integrity. We tend to stick with the form regardless of what has happened to the substance. Further, this attitude toward voting may derive in part from the general tendency to play the role of Robin Hood, coupled with a reluctance to acknowledge this practice for what it is. Americans, at least, have some abhorrence of forcibly taking from the few and giving to the many without any sanction whatsoever. . . . But few people with this propensity feel any pangs of conscience if it can be demonstrated that "the people voted for it." Thus, those who achieve political power are prone to seek popular sanction for their acts of legal plunder. And, as government increases its plundering activities, more and more citizens "want in" on the popular say-so. . . .
>
> Frederic Bastiat [in *The Law*] gave us some good thoughts on this subject:
>
> > If law were restricted to protecting all persons, all liberties, and all properties; if law were nothing more than the organized combination of the individual's right to self-defense; if law were the obstacle, the check, the punisher of all oppressions and plunder—is it likely that we citizens would then argue much about the extent of the franchise?
> >
> > Under these circumstances, is it likely that the extent of the right to vote would endanger that supreme good, the public peace? Is it likely that the excluded classes would refuse to peaceably await the coming of their right to vote? Is it likely that those who had the right to vote would jealously defend their privilege?
>
> If the law were confined to its proper functions, everyone's interest in the law would be the same. Is it not clear that, under these circumstances, those who voted could not inconvenience those who did not vote?

Read's reasoning leads him to a conclusion that is very different from the drumbeat, heard by Americans during every election cycle, that one "must vote."

> There is no moral or political or social obligation to vote merely because we are confronted with ballots. . . . Is this

> so-called obligation of a citizen to vote, *regardless of the ballot presentations*, any more than a camouflage for political madness on the rampage? And, further, doesn't this "obligation" deny to the citizen the only alternative left to him—not to endorse persons or measures he regards as repugnant? When presented with two trimmers, how else, *at this level*, is he to protest? Abstinence from ballot-casting would appear to be his only way to avoid being untrue to himself.

The question of whether to vote, along with a great deal of social pressure for an affirmative answer, comes up every election. Read articulates an alternative view based on the the need for integrity in those who represent citizens. He argues that not voting for a trimmer of moral principles does not worsen, and may improve, politics and Americans' well-being.

Read rejects the tidal wave of electoral rhetoric that insists people vote regardless of their choice. Equating that rhetoric to a disregard for integrity, he asks what would happen if potential voters focused on integrity. In a political landscape where politics is largely divorced from integrity and voting rhetoric falls abysmally short on logical reasoning, his argument that we should not vote in the absence of integrity deserves serious thought.

85.

Obeying Read's Law

Leonard Read has definite ideas about the legitimate role of laws—that they should do no more than restrain harm to individuals and their rights because going further would violate the rights of some citizens. In "Read's Law" (Read 1969c), an article from the October 1969 issue of *The Freeman*, he creates an eponymous law about fidelity to that principle.

> It is becoming more and more fashionable for probers into political economy to concoct a "law" and tack their name onto it. Doubtless, this fad stems from such famous instances as *Gresham's Law*: "Bad money drives out good money." Or, *Say's Law of Markets*: "Production generates its own purchasing power."
>
> This tendency among our contemporaries is a humorous way of presenting a serious idea. . . .
>
> [One of] the best known . . . is *Parkinson's Law*: "Expenses rise to meet income."
>
> A book entitled *The Peter Principle* currently heads the bestseller list: "In a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence."
>
> *Brozen's Law* reads: "Most obviously true economic policy propositions are false."
>
> *Rogge's Rule* tickles my fancy: "Whenever the government passes a law for your protection, take to the hills—because you are about to be had!"
>
> The subject here, however, is *Read's Law*: "No politician can fly higher in office than he flew while getting there."
>
> . . . The height to which I aspire is freedom; that is, no restraint against any creative action. In other words, freedom is my idea of high; socialism, statism—call it what you will—is my idea of low.
>
> . . . My "law" [could] be stated something like this: "No politician, after getting into office, can remove any more restraints against freedom than he promised to remove in his campaign speeches."

. . . Over the years, I have known numerous aspirants for high office who, in private, endorse the freedom philosophy all the way. . . . Later, as I hear or read his campaign speeches, I find nary a word about the socialism he intends to repeal if elected. . . . Then, friends of mine hopefully ask "What achievements for freedom are you looking forward to from so-and-so?" I respond by repeating *Read's Law*. . . . My questioners chuckle, reflect on the campaign speeches, and draw their own conclusions. . . .

Bear in mind that my claim has to do only with an inability to fly higher, not lower. An officeholder's "ceiling" is set by his campaign speeches; he can *descend* to any level. . . .

Let me explain how I discovered *Read's Law*. The campaign manager of a candidate was my close personal friend. Because his man's speeches were socialistic, I was critical. "Why, he believes the same as you and I do," came the reply. "He has to say what he's saying to get elected. Once in office, he will practice what we believe." The contention was that his candidate would fly higher in office than he flew while getting there. But no one was able to prove that untenable thesis. . . .

This experience led me to three important conclusions. The first is that no officeholder can ever overthrow any socialistic practice unless there is an enormous consensus that it be done away with; otherwise, the practice is too tightly woven into the social fabric to be cast out by some political trick. Ridding our society of TVA or Social Security, for instance, is utterly impossible unless there be a general agreement for repeal. The candidates who never mention repeal in their campaign speeches make no contribution whatsoever to a new consensus. So, they have mustered no support for it, whatever their private views may be. . . . They are impotent. On the other hand, if they had been elected because of their advocacy of repeals, they would then have a popular mandate to so perform.

Second, the candidates who pretend privately to believe in freedom principles and who run for office on other than a clear-cut freedom platform, do not understand these principles. . . . The reason that so many of us

> are deceived in our private talks with these men is that we cannot see into their minds as to whether or not they really apprehend the ideas behind their words. We can only know for sure what they believe when we see them in action—in their campaigns. Candidates who thoroughly apprehend freedom principles would not—indeed, could not—do other than uphold them. . . .
>
> Finally, let politicians who privately say they are for freedom, but who publicly espouse socialism in order to get elected, be faithful to their public pronouncements. Freedom will fare better this way. Exposing the fallacies of socialism and explaining the principles of freedom cannot possibly be achieved except through fidelity. Truth can never be found by those or among those who practice dissimulation.
>
> Devotees of freedom have everything to gain and nothing to lose when campaign promises, regardless of how socialistic, are faithfully kept.

Read's law expresses how campaign rhetoric imposes an upper limit on what a candidate professing the principles of liberty might achieve toward advancing freedom if elected to office. That is a valuable insight, but it also points to another truth that lovers of liberty need to remember: "The advancement of freedom is not a matter of *who* wields political power over creative actions; rather, it depends upon the disassembling of such power." Politicians are not the answer, so pinning one's hopes on them is a recipe for disappointment. But those who "fly higher" have the potential to advance freedom. They can only do so, however, by articulating a consistent case for liberty beforehand; otherwise, in the face of a political flood tide against them, they will be unable to disassemble their own and others' power over us when they are in office.

86.

Our Politicians Would Probably Be Better If We Picked Them by Lot

As we near every election, Americans hear political partisans arguing more and more intensely that if we vote for them and their coconspirators, we will end up in the best of all possible worlds. It reminds me of Will Rogers's quip that "if we got one-tenth of what was promised to us . . . there wouldn't be any inducement to go to heaven" (Ketchum 1973).

Such assertions are backed by get-out-the-vote efforts that even try to make voting mandatory. Despite such supercharged hyperbole and extreme proposals, there are good reasons to question whether the political world as we know it would be as good as it gets if only the best party were put in charge. In "Regardless of Choice, Vote!," from his 1964 book *Anything That's Peaceful* (Read 1964a), Leonard Read proposes a simple thought experiment that can help us consider the issues involved.

Read suggests that most officeholders be chosen by lot for single terms. In the current system, politicians and their partisans "compete to see which one can get himself in front of the most popular voter grab bag in order to stand foursquare for some people's supposed right to other people's income."

At first, the idea seems shocking. After all, "voting is deeply embedded in the democratic mores as a duty." Nevertheless, "any person who is conscious of our rapid drift toward the omnipotent state can hardly escape the suspicion that there may be a fault in our habitual way of looking at things."

What motivates this thought experiment? "If it be conceded that the role of government is to secure 'certain unalienable rights, that among them are the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,' by what stretch of the imagination can this be achieved when we vote for those who are openly committed to unsecuring these rights?"

Read looks at how this limited role of government would reduce the vigor with which political abuses now invade our lives. Consider his conclusions: "With nearly everyone conscious that only 'ordinary citizens' were occupying political positions, the question of *who should rule* would lose its significance. Immediately, we would become acutely aware of the far more

important question: *What shall be the extent of the rule?* That we would press for a severe limitation of the state seems almost self-evident."

Instead of focusing on who can most effectively package their preferred violations of the Constitution, people would focus on the foundational constitutional question: what is it that government does better for us with our own resources than we could do ourselves. Only the very small number of things that pass this test can improve the general welfare. The current bipartisan momentum to increase the size of government would be reversed. Read lists some probable consequences of this:

> Political parties—now more or less meaningless—would cease to exist. . . . No more campaign speeches with their promises of how much better we would fare were the candidates to spend our income for us. . . . An end to campaign fund-raising. . . . No more self-chosen "saviors" catering to base desires in order to win elections.

Political parties are, in substantial part, coalitions that invade our rights. Voting that would shift control from one coalition to another cannot defend these rights. But selection by lot would eliminate the strategy of bundling promises of who will be Peter and who will be Paul in the political game that robs Peter to pay Paul. It would also undermine the lies now sold and free up for more productive ends the massive resources dedicated to selling them. And, as a bonus, many Americans would have lower blood pressure. It would be "an end to that type of voting in Congress which has an eye more to re-election than to what's right."

If, as some claim, the prospect of reelection provides incentives for politicians to advance American society, it also encourages them to keep the dominant political coalition in office by harming those who are not in it. And where the Constitution (and, perhaps even more so, the vision of the Declaration of Independence) is more honored in the breach than the observance, Read thinks the latter behavior will clearly dominate.

> The mere prospect of having to go to Congress during a lifetime . . . would completely reorient citizens' attention to the principles which bear on government's relationship to society . . . on which the future of society depends. In other words, the strong tendency would be to bring out the best, not the worst, in every citizen.

Read here comes back to the big question of what government can do for the well-being—and to the satisfaction—of society. For Locke, such a function boils down to more effectively enforcing our rights against attack by foreign nations, neighbors, and the government itself. This would allow the maximal expansion of mutually voluntary arrangements, make us better citizens, and free us from government impediments to creative improvement.

But selection by lot isn't going to happen any time in the foreseeable future, so why bother thinking about it?

> Merely to let the mind dwell on this intriguing alternative to current political inanities gives all the ammunition one needs to refrain from casting a ballot for one of two candidates, neither of whom is guided by integrity. Unless we can divorce ourselves from this unprincipled myth, we are condemned to a political competition that has only one end: the omnipotent state. . . . [Alternatively,] such scrutiny may reveal that voting for candidates who bear false witness is not required of the good citizen.

87.

Justice Delayed Is Justice Denied

If an injustice has been done, should it be prolonged or eliminated? The well-worn adage that "justice delayed is justice denied" would seem to make the answer clear. But government often fails to live up to its role as society's agency for the defense of justice. It often violates rights and denies justice in the name of helping someone else. When it refuses to rectify the abuse, it justifies the delay as only fair to those who benefited from the initial violation.

A good example involves the "temporary" World War II rent controls on housing in New York City. These are still in place today because they created and then aggravated over time the housing shortage, which was the rationale for the controls in the first place. (This led Milton Friedman to quip, "There is nothing so permanent as a temporary government program.")

In "Causes of Authoritarianism," from his 1958 book *Why Not Try Freedom?* (Read 1958), Leonard Read addresses government's eagerness to violate property rights and treat the benefits it transfers to others as if they themselves have become inviolable property rights.

> Fallacy: *Authoritarianism Should Be Removed Gradually*
>
> Following World War II and prior to the relaxation of wartime wage and price controls, I made a speech entitled, "I'd Push the Button." This title was taken from the first sentence, "If there were a button on this rostrum, the pressing of which would instantaneously release all wage and price controls, I'd put my finger on it and push."
>
> This was regarded as a radical notion. . . . However, if an act is morally wrong or economically unsound, the quicker it is abolished the better.
>
> Many people seem to hold the view that the beneficiary of special privilege acquires a vested interest in his unique position and should not be deprived of it abruptly. They give little thought to the many persons from whom the plunder has been taken. It makes no difference what example of wage or price control one takes—rent control

is as good as any. Under this control people have been permitted to occupy someone else's property at less than the free market would allow. By reason of this fact renters have been privileged. . . . The landlord has been deprived of the fruits of his own labor. Yet, when it comes to the matter of restoring justice, most people will think of the disadvantages suddenly falling upon the renters rather than the accrued damage done to the owner.

Imagine an habitual and successful thief. For years he has been robbing everybody in the community without their knowledge. . . . Upon discovering his fraud, should his robbery be diminished gradually or should justice be restored to the community at once? The answer appears too obvious to deserve further comment.

People, when contemplating the removal of authoritarianism, seem to fear that a sudden restoration of justice would too severely disrupt the economy. The fear is groundless. During the early days of our New Deal we were the victims of the NIRA, the National Industrial Recovery Act, a system of wage floors, price ceilings, and production quotas. . . . Slowly, the fallacy of this nefarious program was realized. Thoughtful business leaders agreed it had to be repealed. But, many of them argued that the repeal would have to be gradual. To remove it at once would throw the economy into a tailspin. Then, one afternoon the Supreme Court ruled that NIRA was unconstitutional. As of that moment all of its regulations and controls ceased to exist. Did this shake our economy? There wasn't a noticeable quiver except that all indices of prosperity showed improvement.

The fallacy of the theory of gradualism can be illustrated thus: A big, burly ruffian has me on my back, holding me down. My friends, observing my sad plight, agree that the ruffian must be removed. But, believing in the theory of gradualism, they contend that the ruffian must be removed *gradually*. They fail to see that the only result of the ruffian's removal would be my going to work *suddenly*!

Government often ignores the theft involved when it imposes price controls and then treats the prospect of restoring justice as unjust. Leonard

Read, in his well-reasoned devotion to liberty, sees this fact clearly while virtually everyone else ignores it. He also recognizes that not only are rights, whose defense is *the* core government function, violated in the process, but society also loses because price controls reduce the creation of greater consumption possibilities.

> There is nothing to fear by any nation of people in the removal of restrictions to creative and productive effort except the release of creative and productive effort. And why should they fear that which they so ardently desire?

88.

Our Self-Interest in a Good Society

How much serious thought do people give to what a good society entails? While there have been, and continue to be, utopian thinkers, their visions always require coercing others into a mold. Whenever these visions have managed to become a reality, the results have been abysmal. Other than these utopians and other meddlesome would-be controllers, most people give the matter almost no thought.

Citizens who fail to think carefully about society allow government controllers to assume power and wreak havoc. Particularly in "Shoemaker, Stick to Your Last," from his 1974 book *Having My Way* (Read 1974), Leonard Read argues that everyone has an interest in making the good society possible. But some would say that understanding or creating a good society is too complex for those who work for a living. They are both right and wrong: a good society is too complex to plan or create, but we as individuals only have to recognize its essential basis—the golden rule, which is not complicated at all.

> There is a matter of transcendent importance that I believe is everybody's business: *the structuring of a good society*! Were we to concentrate on this aspect of our own business as much as we are inclined to meddle in what is surely none of our business, a good society would be a viable prospect. Why all of this emphasis on the good society? It is the environmental prerequisite to individual fulfillment. And that *is* your business—and mine!
>
> The need for a good society . . . is everybody's business, but relatively few recognize their responsibility. . . .
>
> . . . When people in general are unaware of their personal stake in the good society and have no opinions of their own, when they think this is a matter requiring only the attention of specialists, they cannot tell a wise counselor from a charlatan; they are the easy victims of utopian dreamers, seekers after power, organizational gadgetry designers.
>
> . . . People who insist that it is none of their business and who remain intellectually sterile so far as the good society is concerned, are attracted to political gimmicks,

> to shortcuts, to promises of rewards that put no demands upon them—none whatsoever! All this and heaven too, and no need to attend to personal virtues!
>
> Why do so many people get the false notion that the structuring of a good society is over their heads? It is simply because the schemes to which they are attracted—promises of the guaranteed life—are so varied, complex, and nonsensical that no one can understand them, not even the authors! . . . Their eyes are cast upon that which cannot be comprehended. They are not blind; they are simply staring at darkness!
>
> . . . You and I give society whatever character it has, and no society can be better than are the individuals who compose it. You cannot make me good, or even better than I am. Nor can all the social planners and schemers in the world. I alone have any control over my goodness or improvement, and you alone over yours. To become aware of this and then to strive for self-improvement is to mind one's own business—including one's obligation to promote the good society.
>
> How simple is it to become the good citizen? As simple as to understand and to adhere to the most widely pronounced and the oldest ethical proposition of distinctly universal character: the Golden Rule. . . .
>
> . . . This movement . . . is strictly voluntary, the only way that man can act in a free market society. And the market is automatically free when government is limited to keeping the peace, that is, to restraining destructive actions. Contrast this with the coercive society manifested by people in all walks of life saying, in effect, "I paid for it; I might as well get my share." Implicit in this latter way of life is dictocratic control of creative activities: "Do as I say, or else!"

In an era in which building upon "the Great Society" and earlier models undermines our potential to achieve a good society, Leonard Read urges citizens to take the issue seriously. The task is not beyond our understanding, because, rather than plan the good society, we need only appreciate, follow, and support long-established moral and ethical concepts, such as the golden rule. While a good society cannot be coerced into existence, voluntary interactions can build the foundation for one.

89.

Open versus Closed Minds

In our world, people agree on very little. One exception may be the high regard for having an open mind and the criticism against having a closed mind. Such rhetoric presumes that what we are open or closed to is the truth, but we are also routinely exposed to a great deal of nonsense, which is not good to be open to.

Today, Americans are repeatedly told to be open-minded and "follow the science" (say, on mask restrictions) even when the science supports falsehoods. At the same time, they are browbeaten into closing their minds to legitimate questions about vaccines, mandated closures, critical race theory, and more. Both types of argument are used to reduce our freedoms.

Leonard Read insightfully addresses such issues in "Open versus Closed Minds," from his 1973 book *Who's Listening?* (Read 1973). We should open our minds to what he writes.

> Open-mindedness is almost everywhere hailed as a virtue. . . . A person of closed mind, on the other hand, is generally condemned as narrow, shallow, nit-witted. . . . But this, of course, poses the question: To what should one's mind be closed and to what should it be open?
>
> . . . I would like my mind open to truths yet to be perceived and closed to all nonsense. . . .
>
> While no one knows overmuch, each of us knows some things. . . . A good rule: Close the mind on what one knows and understands and keep it open to what is not known and understood. In either function, one's mind serves him as a guide . . . helping him to avoid the ditches and stay on the road toward his destination.

Read explains why neither open—nor closed-mindedness necessarily indicates wisdom on a topic.

> The more one knows and understands, the more the issues upon which his mind is closed! But although a closed mind may indicate the number of issues upon which a man has reflected and reached settled conclusions, it also might be a sign that one has perceived next to nothing. The degree of

> closed-mindedness is not necessarily an accurate gauge of how much one knows and understands!
>
> The lesson? Never try to estimate the knowledge and wisdom of others by how closed or open their minds. . . . A person's mind may be closed with . . . things which he knows or sincerely believes and upon which he can act; or it may be closed and quite empty, receptive to no ideas at all. By the same token, a mind may be open, but open to every kind of an idea—wise or foolish; or it may be so open on every side that no idea can be registered there for reference or use. So the question is not entirely whether a mind is open or closed but whether it is a working mind and, if so, to what purpose.

He asks a very uncommon question about what we should and should not be open to: What kind of openness would serve both ourselves and society—both those around us today and in posterity?

> The idea that one's mind should be open to that which is not known or understood and that our aim is to grow in knowledge and wisdom, gives rise to a logical and relevant question. How may we best serve each other as each of us pursues this end? *By opening our minds to each other*! By so doing, we expose what light we have gained and, thus, maximize the total enlightenment. Open-mindedness in its best sense!
>
> Unquestionably, this sharing process accounts for the greater expanse of knowledge and wisdom . . . we have inherited from the past. . . . We are free to pick their brains, so to speak, to whatever extent we are willing to open our minds to their ideas. Likewise, we may pick the brains of one another among our contemporaries to the extent each is willing, always bearing in mind the personal responsibility to choose and judge which ideas to accept or reject, and which of ours are worthy of sharing with others.
>
> As Ortega phrased it, "The known is what's no longer a problem." So numerous and all-pervasive are our problems that the unknown must be regarded as infinite. . . . Those issues to which the mind is still open are problems rather than answers. . . . Thus, the best one can do for others is to

> enumerate those ideas and propositions on which his own mind is closed—express what he believes to be true.

To help us understand open—and closed-mindedness, Read lays out the core principles on which his mind is closed—that is, settled—principles which he believes are true and serve as solid premises from which to reason and evaluate behavior. "Here I stand, I can do no other."

1. The Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments.
2. The good society rests on individuals having high moral scruples and ethical guidelines; no organizational gadgetry, however deftly devised, can overcome moral and ethical deficiencies.
3. Government limited to administering justice and keeping the peace—equality before the law—is an essential adjunct to morality. . . .
4. Government—organized force—can only inhibit, restrain, penalize. It has no business interfering in the creative realm.
5. Creativity stems exclusively from individuals acting privately, competitively, cooperatively, voluntarily.
6. No man who lives, no association, nor any government is competent to decide for any other where he shall work, what his hours or wage shall be, what and with whom he may exchange, or what thoughts he shall entertain.
7. Freedom in transactions is an absolute principle.
8. The value of any good or service is what another will give in willing exchange.
9. The good or bad politician is not the cause of good or bad government. He reflects the thinking of his constituents. When the thinking is good enough, then good men can and will be elected to office.
10. Obedience to one's highest conscience is to seek approval from God, not men.

Read's closed-mindedness toward changing his mind about certain principles encourages serious reflection about what we believe. He seems to echo Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*: "If anyone can convince or show me that I am wrong in thought or deed, I will gladly change. It is truth that I

seek; and truth never yet hurt any man. What does hurt is persistence in error or in ignorance" (Aurelius 1902).

Read also provides a way to evaluate the quality of our own closed-mindedness.

> There is a reliable test as to whether or not one's closed-mindedness derives from a growing knowledge or from a lack of understanding. If from lack, there will be a sense of know-it-all-ness; if from growth, the more issues on which one's mind is closed, the better paved is his access to the unknown. This test merely emphasizes the obvious: the more one knows, the more is he aware of the unknown.

90.

The Love of Liberty

In "The Love of Liberty," from his 1975 book of the same name, Leonard Read (1975b) addresses something very close to his heart. Because it was so central to Read's whole enterprise, and because we live in an age that is very far from loving liberty, it is worth renewed attention.

> Everyone loves liberty, so let's clear the decks—make it possible! . . .
>
> . . . No other political document in history can approach our Declaration as the fountainhead of liberty. Yet, at the time, the detractors were as common as the initiators were rare—the multitude and the exceptional few!
>
> . . . [People] bow to the shadow while trampling the very substance of liberty . . . evidence of the meager knowledge of what liberty is. For instance, it will be shouted (but not in these terms) that liberty is a liberality with the lives and livelihood of others for self-benefit. . . .
>
> . . . Were we to know what it is, aware of the social structure in which it thrives, and willing to pay the price, it is liberty we would have.
>
> Liberty is *freedom of choice*. Everyone loves freedom of choice for himself, if not for others; therefore, everyone loves liberty.
>
> Others, of course, may have values or priorities that differ from mine. Their choices are not mine—or vice versa. But does this mean that any of us rejects freedom of choice? . . . I love the freedom to choose . . . my employment . . . how the fruits of my own labor shall be expended . . . the price at which I am willing to offer my goods and/or services . . . with whom I shall exchange this or that . . . the books I read . . . the teachers who may enlighten me . . . my religion . . . the cars I drive, the clothes I wear, the food I eat, that is, what I shall consume . . . when and where I shall travel . . . what I shall think, speak, write, and with whom I may share my thoughts.

> If there be anyone who does not favor freedom of choice as much as I do, that person is unknown to me. Thus, my conclusion has to be that everyone loves liberty.
>
> . . .
>
> While everyone loves liberty for self, there are ever so many who are unwilling to accord freedom of choice to others. Merely take note of those who favor and endorse wage and price controls, privileges, supports, subsidies, tariffs, quotas, embargoes, the coercive taking from some and giving to others, restrictions on competition; indeed, all deviations from the free market, private ownership, limited government way of life. Note these, and one will have a fair estimate of the number of those who love liberty for self but not for others. They love liberty but *they live license*.
>
> Thus, the love of liberty for self and not for others is but a selfish, greedy, and unattainable dream. Why not be realistic? The formula? The Golden Rule: Do not to others that which you would not have them do unto you. Or, in this context, expect not from others that which you will not happily, graciously, intelligently accord to them! This is how the lovers of liberty may experience what they love. There is no other way.

Leonard Read could honestly be said to have fallen in love with liberty. And he left behind a key to advancing it, which would benefit us to better emulate: "I love liberty for self—*and others*!"

91.

Count Our Blessings, Not Miseries

It is a natural human tendency to focus on our problems, but the cost of doing so is to exaggerate their size relative to the blessings we benefit from. While those who advocate for liberty recognize the cornucopia of blessings it enables, they also see those liberties eroding and sometimes collapsing.

It is indeed disheartening to have less liberty than we should, but this has always been the case. The bright side is that liberty, through the many ways it gets around man-made limitations, has bequeathed us blessings beyond the wildest dreams of earlier generations. And there are great potential gains ahead through the expansion of liberty.

Leonard Read urges us to "Count Our Blessings, Not Miseries," an essay from his 1981 book *Thoughts Rule the World* (Read 1981b).

> There are ever so many freedom devotees who are afflicted with downheartedness. Their pessimism is due to the political skulduggery—"rascality; trickery"—that features our present decline into socialism.
>
> . . . We need to see the evil but, at the same time, see the good: our blessings—thousands of times greater. . . .
>
> Good and bad have existed together since the beginning of time, but no one needs to wallow in the bad! I do not listen to or read the bad . . . [and] I have that much more time to think about what's right and to count my blessings. . . .
>
> . . . Our blessings are so common that we forget to praise them, that is, to count them! . . .
>
> The original source of the American miracle was our Declaration—unseating government as the source of human rights and placing the Creator there. The companion documents—the Constitution and the Bill of Rights—limited government more than ever before in history! Result? Americans looked to themselves rather than to government for welfare. Self-responsibility on an unprecedented scale! The millions enjoying blessings by the millions!

What happened after decades of countless blessings? The Source forgotten! And why? The blessings have become so abundant that today's citizens take them for granted. . . .

There is, also, a very important reason for counting our blessings: it helps rid the soul of covetousness. To count one's blessings is to accent what's right. . . .

. . . Covetousness is as deadly as any of the other sins—indeed, it tends to induce the others.

Covetousness or envy generates a destructive radiation with ill effect on all it touches. . . .

. . . Consider the social implications, the effects of envy on others. At first blush, the rich man appears not to be harmed because another covets his wealth. Envy, however, is not a benign, dormant element of the psyche; it has the same intensive force as rage, and a great deal of wisdom is required to put it down. Where understanding and self-control are wholly lacking, the weakling will resort to thievery, embezzlement, piracy, even murder, to gratify his envy and "get his share."

Though weakness of character afflicts all of us to some extent, only a few are so lacking in restraining forces as to personally employ naked force, such as thievery, to realize the objects of envy. Fear of apprehension and reprisal tends to hold such open-faced evil in check.

However, if the evil act can be screened, if the sense of personal guilt and responsibility can be sufficiently submerged, that is, if self-delusion can be effected, gratification of covetousness will be pursued by the "best people."

The way is no secret: achieve anonymity in a mob, committee, organization, society, or hide behind legality or majority vote.

With the fear of exposure removed, millions of Americans feather their own nests at the expense of others, and on a scale never imagined by thieves, pirates, or embezzlers. Our "best people" . . . gratify their envy with no qualms whatsoever. But their salved conscience in no way lessens the evil of covetousness; quite the contrary, it emphasizes to us how

powerfully this evil operates at the politico-economic level. This subtle evil is indeed the genesis of more obvious sins.

We should also note the extent to which this "guiltless" taking of property by coercion is rationalized. Accomplices, bearing such titles as philosophers and economists, . . . explain how the popular depredations are good to everyone, even for those looted. Thus, we find that covetousness, unchecked in the individual, lies at the root of the decline and fall of nations and civilizations. . . .

As contrasted with the emulation of virtues, which takes nothing from but adds to the welfare of others, envy is nothing more than an avaricious greed to possess what exclusively belongs to others . . . [and is] opposed to an elevation of the spirit. . . . William Penn grasped this point: "Covetousness is the greatest of Monsters, as well as the root of all Evil."

As a person cannot be in two places at the same time, so is it impossible for the eye to be cast covetously at the material possessions of others and cast aspiringly at one's own creativity. Thus, envy leaves unattended the human being's upgrading. . . . Envy leaves the soul, the spirit, the intellect, the psyche to rot, and there can be no greater evil than this.

. . . It surely behooves each of us to find a way to rid himself of this evil.

. . . *Count your blessings*!

Any person who is not aware of countless blessings, regardless of how low or high his estate, will be no more aware of his blessings should his envy be gratified. Awareness of blessings is a state of consciousness and is not necessarily related to abundance and affluence. He who is rich in worldly goods but unaware of his blessings is poor, and probably covetous; he who is poor in worldly goods but aware of his blessings is rich, and assuredly without envy.

. . . Count your blessings . . . for wisdom *is* awareness. . . .

As progress is made in an awareness of our blessings, we are struck by how greatly they outnumber our woes and troubles. In a state of unawareness, the woes loom

> enormous, and we tend to covetousness; in awareness the woes are but trifles, and the covetousness fades away.
>
> This remarkable cure for covetousness also puts us on the road to social felicity; for we best serve ourselves and others through the exercise of *self-responsibility and freedom*!

Read's recognition that we should count our blessings descends from centuries of wisdom and human experience. The advice is certainly no less true of adherents to liberty, whose arguments also rely on the wisdom of the ages (even if largely learned from liberty's absence).

92.

Thank God for the Mess We're In

Signs of trouble are often ignored until the situation is bad enough that it becomes impossible to keep doing so (unless one is mightily determined not to see them). Leonard Read gives much thought to the damage public policy has caused Americans. In "Thank God for the Mess We're In" (Read 1975c), from the March 1975 issue of *The Freeman*, he reflects on how the mess we've made is so great that we might finally start thinking about how to undo the causes.

> There is a reason for our mess. We are now reaping the bitter harvest of the poisonous seed sowed intermittently during the past. We are experiencing bad effects whose causation can be traced to the employment of wrong means. We suffer the natural consequences of our folly. . . . As it is, we need only take our heads out of the sand to see clearly that interventionism not only has failed to provide the promised something for nothing but has led to all sorts of undesirable consequences.
>
> . . . [Many] fail to get the message the mess is meant to convey. Indeed, many are just beginning to realize that we are moving toward disaster, even though we have been on a wrong heading for decades.
>
> Why then do I thank God for the mess we're in? Simply because the mess is sending up signals—messages loud and clear—that our past is filled with errors which inexorably produced their evil results. The consequences we suffer now were caused by past mistakes, and we need to know what wrong actions are responsible for these bad effects. The fact is, we are being graced with warnings which, when and if read aright, can lead to our salvation.

He then discusses how to "see" the blessings of liberty and how government violations of liberty have gotten us into the mess we're in.

> Our past is filled not only with moral but politico-economic errors, and our present likewise. How are we to identify these wrong actions and find the right ones, that

> is, how expose the fallacies of state interventionism and reveal the merits of human liberty as related to the interest and benefit of every one of us?
>
> When liberty prevails, every individual . . . is free to bring *persons* and other scarce resources into complementary and workable combinations. . . . There are millions who can and do bring individuals and other resources into association that render a fantastic service of all sorts to King Consumer. And, when liberty prevails so does competition, a constructive force that assures that the efficient servants rise to serve all of us better.
>
> . . . The aggregate of these energies—the bringing into combination of *things* and *persons*—is beyond the power of anyone to even imagine.

The problem is that government interventions that supposedly aim to advance the general welfare commonly do the opposite, undermining the liberty that is truly essential to our well-being.

> Let us now observe what happens to these sources of creative energy when the state regulates and controls them. What are the consequences when organized physical force—government—controls our creativity, our varied and unique potentialities? To accurately observe and appraise these consequences is to discover the errors—moral and economic—which account for the mess we are in. And the task is to free ourselves from these malpractices. . . .
>
> . . . We have [many] governments—federal, state, and local— . . . commanding millions of us as to what to produce, what and with whom to exchange, what our money is worth; they dictate hours of labor, wages, what our children must study; on and on and on. . . .
>
> . . . They have frustrated, to a marked extent, the morals and the creativity of the citizenry.
>
> As a result of this governmental intervention, the varied talents and the uniqueness of each citizen are more or less imprisoned. . . .
>
> To repeat, when liberty prevails, all are free to bring things and people into workable combinations to the betterment of all. . . . But when the police and their subsidized

> minions regulate and control, a do-asI-say-or-else action replaces, to a great extent, the bringing together actions of free and creative people, and to the detriment of all.

Read concludes with a call to finally heed the red flags that have been flying for so long. He also makes a reference to inflation that speaks to our situation today.

> The signals are loud and clear—far too numerous to recount. The messages are that every one of these evils we now experience are but consequences of past and present errors. . . . We must work on the causes . . . if we would repair our ways!
>
> Let me conclude by calling attention to but one signal, a warning that is fretting millions: . . . the rapid decline in the purchasing power of the dollar. The cause? Inflation! Its causes? Excessive governmental expenditures which in turn are caused by people from all walks of life running to government for every conceivable kind of succor—people feathering their own nests at the expense of others. The remedy? Remove the causes.
>
> In any event, I thank God for the mess we're in and its timely warning that we must change our course to avert disaster.

I have heard many people in recent years echo Read and recognize that we are in a real mess. Such recognition is an important and necessary first step but is far from sufficient to undo the mess. Read was thankful for the heightened potential messes offered for careful thinking followed by action to undo their causes. It is action that offers a payoff for society. Election campaigns don't seem to deliver on Read's hope but instead promise to double down on every policy ever conceived to violate citizens' persons and property, give more power to government, and favor those whose votes are thought to be most effectively buyable. It is profoundly depressing that we keep creating bigger red flags and still continue to avert our eyes. Rather than a boy who cried wolf, we have many who cry that there is no wolf, even when we see it at the door.

93.

Advancing Freedom in Freedom

If you were determined to get the word out about a product or an idea, how would you go about it?

There are many options if you're not constrained by reality, honesty, or logic. You could, for instance, follow the pattern of most recent presidential campaigns. But if you want to communicate the truth, your options are more limited. Going after misrepresentations tooth and nail is one way, but what if you want to advance liberty?

It is not enough to analyze how liberty is infringed and violated. Most people will not forgo coercion, even out of self-interest, without truly believing in liberty. But getting to that point is an individual endeavor and requires living life in a truly noncoercive way lest hypocrisy should overwhelm insight. In this way, commitment to liberty is like ethics, which is demonstrated more than taught. In Ralph Waldo Emerson's words, "what you *are* speaks so loud that I cannot hear what you say."

Leonard Read discusses which tactics best "infect" others with belief in liberty in "Await Discovery," from his 1974 book *Having My Way* (Read 1974). His unique take is food for thought.

> We need . . . a radical change in tactics; that is, a viable methodology for advancing freedom in harmony with the philosophy itself.
>
> . . . What, then, is right method? It is concentration on the improvement of self as distinguished from efforts to set others straight. Clearly, were all people devoted to self-improvement, *confining their efforts to such exemplary behavior*, there would not be a meddler in society; and without meddlers there could be no socialism, communism, state interventionism or welfarism, call authoritarianism what you will. So, first, last, and always, look to the method.
>
> Impatience is a tendency of human nature which frustrates our efforts to advance freedom, causing us to act in ways which repel potential colleagues. If others cannot see what is so clear to us, *make* them see: attack, fight, flaunt our superiority—for time is of the essence! This is the

activist approach. How do potential converts react? They run in the other direction. . . . Why? A person uncommitted to a philosophy cannot appreciate its being shouted at him from the housetops. If that's an example of freedom, heaven forbid; I want none of it!

. . . No one, however skilled, can insinuate or ram an idea into the consciousness of another. . . . Each admits only what he chooses, and no more. . . . Each man is in charge of his own inner sanctum. . . . All attempts to bring others to our point of view by pressure tactics, no matter how well intentioned, are destined to fail; they do not good but harm!

. . . Do absolutely nothing beyond the improvement of self, that is, the building and stocking of one's own storehouse!

. . . If you or I have anything another believes to be worth taking, he will find us out by himself, knock at our doors, and ask our counsel. . . . Look to history for confirmation. . . .

At work here is a universal law—the Law of Attraction. Excellence exerts an invisible magnetic force upon those who seek it. . . .

There remains, however, the most compelling reason why no one of us should parade his "wisdom," but rather await discovery. *It is only when a person has discovered a bit of enlightenment for himself that he really possesses it.* . . . "Seek and ye shall find" has a logical extension: What ye find shall be thine. . . .

When we hurl or shout our know-it-all-ness at others, the impact sends them away from, not toward, the free society. The "wisdom" bounces back in the direction from whence it came and is never possessed by the persons at whom we aimed it. All loss and no gain! . . .

. . . What is my role? Who, among all the world's people, is my major concern? Myself! Not you, and not anyone else, simply because others are beyond my powers to correct. Nor must my motivation . . . be as a means toward your improvement or anyone else's—only my own. To the extent that I succeed, to that extent *may* some of my

> enlightenment be discovered. But that is up to others, not me. . . .
>
> Await discovery! Simply make certain that, if and when another seeks your light, it is as bright as it can be.

Read offers a unique approach to "educating" others about liberty. The first step addresses not others but ourselves. We must attend to our own enlightenment before we have anything to offer others. We shouldn't impose our views on others, which would violate their liberty, but this won't be necessary with those who are receptive if we really have pursued the best in ourselves. We have only to "await discovery."

This does not describe most advocacy on the part of liberty, which has largely conformed to the patterns used in political advocacy for innumerable forms of coercion. Such efforts on behalf of liberty have not been very successful. So perhaps it is worth reconsidering Read's approach and start by fixing ourselves rather than others.

94.

Look to the Miracle!

In my research into Leonard Read's writing, I recently came across "Look to the Miracle" (Read 1963a) an essay from the May 1963 issue of *Notes from FEE*. As a longtime writer for the publication, and a reader for even longer, I thought what he had to say almost half a century ago about how his work resists traditional classification would interest those who now find themselves in the same situation.

Read first pinpoints the source of the pigeonholing problem. "Having grown used to master plans, political and economic blueprints, and collective cure-alls, many persons can no longer conceive of a philosophy broader than any one of man's handmade panaceas." This seems even truer of today's world, which is increasingly viewed as a bipolar battle between the Left and the Right. But FEE is not intended to be, and has never been, part of that dynamic that threatens to tear America apart.

> We are as far from social, economic, and political authoritarianism as anyone can get!
>
> . . . [We are] individuals who set out diligently in pursuit of what's right . . . [with] no label more descriptive than "students of liberty." . . .
>
> . . . The answers from FEE's quest fit no preconceived pattern simply because our arsenal includes no panacea or blueprint or plan or man-concocted gimmick.
>
> The thoughts at FEE run along two lines. Some people might think of the first as negative. But is it really "negative" to call something black when blackness is, in some quarters, represented as white? Is it negative to expose fallacies?
>
> This aspect of FEE's work consists of deflating the claims, promises, and pontifications of little Caesars who strut across the American stage; perhaps "debunking" better describes this phase of what we do. Our nation's would-be rulers, in and out of the political arena, haven't the slightest doubt about their ability to improve our lot—if only we'd turn our lives over to their management! . . .
>
> These would-be masters are from all walks of life but they tend to concentrate in the federal bureaucracy. . . .

Collectivists would extend the dependencies of the parent-child relationship to society at large. It is our view, on the contrary, that no person or group, regardless of how organized—as government or otherwise—has any competency whatsoever forcibly to control the creative energies of any person or persons. Those who presume almightiness are no more than destructive pretenders—fallacy mongers—and we try continually to expose, not the pretenders themselves, but the shallowness of their pretensions.

This side of FEE's work has to do with criticism—necessary, yet useless by itself. The other phase of thought at FEE is of a positive, probing nature and outranks the former in importance, interest, and difficulty. Its goal is to discover how to restore a faith in free men.

Why the need for a faith in free men? . . . Such faith, today, is at low ebb. . . . More and more of our citizens are losing faith in themselves to achieve, through voluntary action, the good ends they have in view. Reliance on people voluntarily and cooperatively organized is being replaced by a growing reliance on the arbitrary management of human affairs by government. With increasing faith in coercion as a means of creative achievement, faith that free men can do things by their own efforts correspondingly diminishes. . . . It follows that there can be no reversal of the trend away from freedom except as faith in free men is restored . . . when free to act creatively as they please and on their own responsibility.

Now, this is where the miracle comes in . . . which transcends man's know-how. . . . Am I not warranted in believing I live by phenomena far beyond my ken? There is, indeed, justification for my faith.

Yet, this is the point where difficulty begins. Blest with Nature's miraculous outpourings—an infinite abundance our finite minds can but dimly grasp—we live our lives more or less unconscious of the elements on which our existence depends. We tend to become aware of these blessings only as they are restricted or taken from us. . . .

. . . We tend to be ignorant of what we are and what sustains us. The same blindness afflicts us as we look toward our economic world. We tend to ignore or be skeptical of

that which transcends our know-how. Almost everyone will concede that only God can make a tree, but most of us will not as readily concede the miraculousness resulting from "millions of private economic decisions being made independently of each other." . . .

The evidence of the miraculousness in the economic sphere, as in Nature, is so profuse, so omnipresent, that we lose sight of it. In this unaware state, we let ourselves be taken in by the little Caesars. . . .

. . . [None can] explain the miracle of the market, but we do know its secret: *freedom in exchange*. As molecules miraculously configurate in Nature to form . . . the infinite variety of her manifestations, so do varied creative human energies automatically, spontaneously, miraculously configurate to form the goods and services we live by. There is one necessary condition: that these creative energies be unfettered. . . .

Those who can see the freedom miracle at work have faith in the countless wonders it will accomplish. FEE's search is for ways to help others see this phenomenon by which we live. Fortunately, all the evidence is on the side of freedom in exchange; all is against the pretenders and their schemes of dictated or administered or authoritarian exchange.

We repeat, look to the miracle! Meanwhile, FEE probes for improved ways to post direction signs for all who are anxious to behold this wonder of wonders.

95.

How to Be like Socrates

Questions can tell us about the preconceptions of those who ask them and whether they seek wisdom or something else. Politicians asking about whom to blame for something they are at fault for or how to violate rights and liberties in a way that seems reasonable are not seeking wisdom.

Asking appropriate questions can be a useful means of achieving wisdom. Unfortunately for most of us, knowing what that wisdom is and how to transfer it to others is a high bar to clear. Leonard Read turns to Socrates for inspiration on this matter in "How to be like Socrates," from his 1973 book *Who's Listening?* (Read 1973).

> Each of us is unique. But the method employed by Socrates to advance understanding is one that all of us might well try to emulate.
>
> The Socratic method of teaching or discussion is to ask a series of easily answered questions that inevitably lead the answerer to a logical conclusion foreseen by the questioner. This is to teach a student *the way of philosophizing*, as distinguished from urging him to memorize the conclusions of philosophers.
>
> . . . This is . . . quite the opposite of the popular "compulsory mis-education" which tends to turn students into carbon copies of so-called teachers. Instead of putting masks on students—blanketing their minds with someone else's "wisdom"—real teaching is an unmasking process, helping [individuals] to find their own hidden aptitudes, potentialities, uniqueness. . . . Enlightenment is the mutual goal.

If the Socratic method can help us get to enlightenment, why don't more people use it? "Why, we must ask, is this superior method so little used? . . . Because we do not know the right questions to ask."

How can we reach the level of wisdom needed to lead others to "own" such wisdom for themselves?

> If one would be like Socrates, where does he start? . . . Training for enlightenment above and beyond where he

> now stands. . . . To ascend, one [first] reaches for the bottom rung. . . . To the extent that this is practiced and mastered, to that extent may one rise step by step toward the top.
>
> . . . Consciously developed, it assures individual growth in awareness, perception, consciousness; and this leads in turn toward the good society.
>
> . . . We seek for truth and share it with those who also seek. . . . We enrich or enlighten each other. . . .
>
> . . . As one succeeds in probing for truth, he becomes more and more conscious of an ever-expanding unknown. . . . If one can reach the level of humility, of wanting to know, then the next higher rung of the ladder is within reach: an intelligent interpretation of self-interest. In reality, this amounts to an understanding of the Golden Rule: one's interest is never served by doing injury to another.

Read turns to exemplars of the kind of wisdom he sought.

> Immanuel Kant was at this level: no one has a moral right to do anything that cannot be rationally conceded as a right to everyone else-the principle of universality. The interest of self and of society are in harmony, not at odds.
>
> William Graham Sumner . . . stated the principle in brilliant terms:
>
> > Every man and woman in society has one big duty. That is to take care of his or her own self . . . the duty of making the best of one's self individually is not a separate thing from the duty of filling one's place in society, but the two are one, and the latter is accomplished when the former is done.

Read also acts as an exemplar of someone seeking wisdom by asking serious questions of himself. "I . . . am aware of knowing nothing, and understand the Golden Rule. However, I do not know enough answers to ask many of the right questions. Why am I not more like Socrates? Simply because I am not wise enough. Nonetheless, each of us can strive for more wisdom."

Finally, he gives a sample of the Socratic path toward liberty:

Q—*Joe Doakes was lynched. Who did it?*

A—A mob.

Q—*Mob is but a label. Of what is it composed?*

A—Individuals.

Q—*Then did not each individual in the mob lynch Joe Doakes?*

A—That would seem to be the case.

Q—*Very well. Can any individual gain absolution by committing murder in the name of a label, the mob, a collective?*

A—I guess not.

Q—*Now that we have established that point, let me pose another question. Do you believe in thievery?*

A—Of course not.

Q—*Logically, then, you do not believe that you should use force to take my income to feather your own nest. True or false?*

A—True.

Q—*Is the principle changed if two of you gang up on me?*

A—Not at all.

Q—*One million? Even a majority?*

A—Well, perhaps O.K. if a majority does it.

Q—*Do you mean that might makes right?*

A—Oh, no.

Q—*That is what you have just said. Would you care to retract that?*

A—To be logical, I must.

Q—*You have now agreed that not even 200 million people or any agency thereof—government, labor unions, educational institutions, business firms, or whatever—have a moral right to feather their nests at the expense of others, that is, to advance their own special interests at taxpayers' expense. You have also admitted that no one gains absolution by acting in the name of a collective. Therefore, is not every member who supports or even condones a wrong collective action just as guilty as if he personally committed the act?*

A—I have never thought of it that way before but I now believe you are right.

Thus, by asking the right questions, one may thread his way through the maze of moral, economic, and

political philosophy toward truth. This is the method of helping others to find right answers for themselves, the way to truth through their own minds. Your problem and mine is to become wiser that we may increase the number of the right questions to ask.

This, in my view, is the way to become more and more like Socrates.

96.

Ends, Means, and Leonard Read

Ovid, in *Heroides*, writes that "the result justifies the deed" (Ovid, *Heroides*, II.85). Machiavelli echoes this idea in *The Prince*. But do the ends really justify the means?

Those who believe so have rampaged through human history—particularly when they have exercised real political power. This belief has motivated all manner of tyrants and would-be social reformers who have treated those living under their power as mere means. Immanuel Kant set out history's most famous answer to Ovid, but no one has offered a better, modern rebuttal to this view than Leonard Read.

Time and again, Read returns to the idea that each person has sovereignty over himself—that is, the power to choose, which is indispensable to that ultimate human end, one's own happiness and flourishing. Read constantly emphasizes the importance of individual growth, emergence, and personal blooming. He reminds us that you are not free to the extent that others control you. The potential to morally improve is stunted by those who use you to create their own utopia.

Read's approach reflects a widely ignored aspect of the issue of ends and means: individuals and their development are both ultimate ends in themselves, but their services can be the means to others' ends. This is the essence of voluntary cooperation. Policy should adhere to the principle that no use of individuals as means to others' ends should violate their potential for growth.

When our ultimate end is the greatest development of individual human potential, then any means that undermines that development is inconsistent with society's only purpose, which is to ensure life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Whenever violent aggression is used as an instrument of social design or control, human potential is diminished.

Read uses the redistributive state, grown gargantuan, to illustrate his view. The state benefits recipients, ennobles those who design and enact the transfers, and supposedly does no harm to those from whom it takes since they are only paying their "fair share" to society. But the coercive process degrades everyone involved.

A mere slogan about paying a "fair share"—meaning that others want your resources for their purposes—cannot negate the harm inflicted on those involuntarily expropriated. Coercive funding deprives individuals of honestly acquired income derived from self-ownership and preempts the individual growth that occurs from acts of kindness and charity.

Recipients of state transfers live on confiscated resources and become nonproducers wholly dependent on others for their survival. Their moral, intellectual, and social maturation is short-circuited, their self-responsibility withers and sometimes dies, and their integrity and the virtues it makes possible are put at grave risk. "Unless an individual is self-controlling, his life is not truly his own" (Read 1964a).

Along the way, those who direct the process become dictators over others' actions and undergo the moral corrosion and corruption that come with power. As Lord Acton reminds us, such power corrupts (Acton 1862). No one ever became a better person from acquiring power over others.

Read also illustrates his view on ends and means with the Ralph Waldo Emerson quote he cites more often than any other: "Cause and effect, means and ends, seed and fruit, cannot be severed; for the effect already blooms in the cause, the end pre-exists in the means, the fruit in the seed" (Emerson 1841).

If individuals are ends in themselves and potential collaborators, then no social goal justifies treating them as cogs in a political apparatus. When the individual "is assigned that niche or role which the political priests believe will best serve whatever societal pattern they have formulated," damage to the core of an individual's humanity is assured. "However lofty the goals, if the means be depraved, the result must reflect that depravity" (Read 1969b).

Read argues that when individuals and their development are recognized as the ends that matter, the morality of the real consequences of policies and programs—as opposed to the imagined utopian results—is implied in the means employed. "Examine carefully the means employed, judging them in terms of right and wrong, and the end will take care of itself."

97.

To Abdicate or Not

Leonard Read admired and promoted wisdom, wherever it could be found, throughout his long history of fighting for liberty. You see it in the many quotes sprinkled throughout his writing. He wanted to build on that wisdom—that insight into truth—to show how it would buttress the case for individual freedom. That is a major reason why Read admired Ludwig von Mises, whom he saw as an exemplar of a wise man in many things.

Read's "To Abdicate or Not" (Read 1971b), from *Toward Liberty*, a 1971 collection of essays honoring Mises, illustrates this well. Consider his discussion of Mises's understanding of what to abdicate and what never to abdicate. "Life is a process of selection and rejection; knowing what to renounce in life and what to embrace are distinguishing marks of a wise man. My theme is Mises and his exemplary achievements in this respect."

He then tells a story in which someone asks Mises a question at the end of a long night of discussion: "Professor Mises . . . suppose you were the dictator of these United States. What would you do?" Mises responds, "I would abdicate."

> Here we have the renunciation side of wisdom: man knowing he should not lord it over his fellows and rejecting even the thought.
>
> Few among us are wise enough to know how little we know. . . . The wise man, on the other hand . . . measures his knowledge against what might be known and confesses to knowing nearly nothing. Such a rare individual weighs his finite knowledge on the scale of infinite truth, and his awareness of his limitations tells him never to lord it over others. Such a person would renounce any position of authoritarian rulership. . . . He would abdicate—forthwith!

If abdication is the appropriate response to the potential for dictatorial power, what logical role does that leave for government, now grown to gargantuan proportions and ruling over every citizen's life?

> Really, no one ever rules another. The most that is achieved . . . is to keep others from being themselves. True, there is

> a role for a societal agency to play in keeping others from being themselves if it be their nature to commit theft, murder, deception, violence, and the like. I am not alluding, however, to the retarding of wrongdoing but, rather, to a person's freedom to be himself creatively. The authoritarian mentality is concerned not with inhibiting destructive actions but with the control and direction of creative actions. This no dictator can do; he can only suppress, deaden, destroy such actions. Creative actions can never be ruled but only ruled out!
>
> The wise man . . . realizes that his knowledge is but infinitesimal . . . but a wee candle in the overall luminosity. . . .
>
> The overall luminosity that makes possible . . . things by which we live and thrive . . . is a storehouse of unimaginable enormity; no individual can perceive a trillionth of it!
>
> The wisdom in knowing that we know not is sometimes glimpsed in relation to things. For instance, it is easily demonstrable that no single person has the knowledge to make a simple pencil, let alone a jet plane. . . . Even so, the realm of things is pestered with know-it-alls, persons who seem unable to relate their tiny glimmers to the overall luminosity and cannot therefore keep themselves in their place.
>
> However, it is when we move from the realm of things to the realm of humanity—man and society—that authoritarians proliferate. Even many who would confess to an ignorance of how to make a dynamo will, with no hesitancy whatsoever, boast of knowing how man and society should be made to perform. Failing to discern that men and their relationships are vastly more complex than any thing or things, they entertain no doubts about their competency to rule mankind.

I cannot but be struck here by how strongly Read's words echo those of another wise man, Adam Smith, in his chessboard analogy from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

> The man of system . . . is apt to be very wise in his own conceit; and is often so enamoured with the supposed beauty

> of his own ideal plan of government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it. . . .
>
> He seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board. He does not consider that the pieces upon the chess-board have no other principle of motion besides that which the hand impresses upon them; but that, in the great chess-board of human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own, altogether different from that which the legislature might chuse to impress upon it. . . . If they are opposite or different, the game will go on miserably, and the society must be at all times in the highest degree of disorder. (Smith 2002)

What can we do with the luminosity, or wisdom, we inherit? As Read so often expresses, we can reform ourselves by acquiring more wisdom, which adds to our society's overall luminosity, but an effort to coercively reform others will reduce it.

> In the realm of humanity . . . overall luminosity presides or rules. . . . It is a body of underlying assumptions, of ideas taken for granted and held more or less in common; is the residual legatee of mankind's history of, as James Coolidge Carter phrased it, "the imperishable record of the wisdom of the illimitable past reaching back to the infancy of the race." It is what is handed down to us plus what we, who live on its growing edge, put into it.
>
> Professor Mises knows that he does not or cannot rule; thus, he abdicates from even the idea of rulership. Knowing what phase of life to renounce is one side of wisdom.
>
> But knowing what phase of life to embrace—to get ever deeper into, from which never to abdicate—is the other side of wisdom. And in this phase, as in the former, we have no exemplar who excels Mises.
>
> . . . The ruling consensus . . . is what is handed down to us, plus what we put into it.
>
> What we put into it is the key. The improvement of the ruling consensus by you or me requires that our own thoughts and actions be, at the very least, a confirmation

of the best that has been handed down to us or, hopefully, an improvement on what the consensus already contains.

We who live on its growing edge can put nothing into the consensus that is not within ourselves. It follows, if we would put anything into it, that life must be devoted to the improvement of what is within us, rather than wasted on the futile attempt to reform others.

I am unaware of any individual who is less the reformer or propagandist than Mises. To the contrary, his life is and always has been distinguished by a search for truth. His remarkable and unmatched economic works are testimony to many virtues but especially to his two-sided wisdom: knowing what phase of life to renounce and what phase of life to embrace.

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