

BOOKS

What It Means to Be a Libertarian: A Personal Interpretation

by Charles Murray

Broadway Books • 1997 • 192 pages • \$20.00

Reviewed by Doug Bandow

Charles Murray has long been one of America's most important social scientists. His book *Losing Ground* touched off a debate over welfare policy by challenging widely held misconceptions of government programs. With *In Pursuit of Happiness and Good Government*, Murray challenged readers to think about the purpose of government.

Now he has written his most radical work yet—*What It Means to Be a Libertarian*. In it, he offers an unapologetic case for liberty. As he explains, “freedom, classically understood, is the stuff by which we live satisfying lives. It is as indispensable to happiness as oxygen is to life. Much of it has been taken from us. We must reclaim it.”

Murray's elegantly written book is dedicated to helping us do just that. His premise is simple: “Force is bad, and cooperation is good.” The reason force is bad, he explains, is that we own ourselves. The reason cooperation is good is that “a voluntary and informed exchange benefits both parties.”

Thus, government should intervene only sparingly. First, to protect people from harm committed by others. Most obviously, this is done through criminal and tort law. Second, to enforce contracts. As Murray explains: “The right of contract and the edifice of law that goes with it is what enables us to do business with people we do not know or have no reason to trust.”

Third, government should provide “public goods.” He acknowledges that not everyone agrees there are such things and that there is a slippery slope—after all, what government depredation is not proclaimed to be in the public interest? But he devotes a chapter to

explaining the “more thoughtful, legal and philosophical tradition” that lies behind the concept. Perhaps the most important characteristic of genuine public goods is nonexclusivity—they cannot be provided to some but not others (e.g., military spending). Moreover, consumption by some does not reduce the supply (say, of clean air) available to others. These tests are relatively uncontroversial.

More problematic is his notion of public goods as functions that yield benefits to the public. Here, he acknowledges, is the slippery slope at its steepest. To set limits, Murray asks three critical questions. Can the good or service be provided by individuals themselves? (Not, notably, will it be provided as quickly or exactly how we prefer.) Next, are we forcing fellow citizens to pay for services that they don't want? And finally, are we expecting them to pay for something that benefits us much more than them?

Even if one wants the government to act, he adds, it should do so at the level closest to the problem. This does not guarantee the protection of freedom, but it preserves a greater opportunity to achieve freedom. As he puts it, “Keeping the definitions as local as possible acts as a brake. When the mistakes become too egregious, people can leave town.”

The result might be a government larger than that preferred by some *Freeman* readers, but it would still be dramatically smaller than that which exists today. As Murray points out: “If everyone applied the classic criteria for defining a public good plus the three questions I just listed to the current inventory of government activities, a huge proportion of them would be so disgracefully out of bounds that they would have no chance of qualifying as public goods.”

Still, the core of *What It Means to Be a Libertarian* is its discussion of liberty, not government. Freedom has obvious practical advantages, of course, but Murray sees the benefits of liberty running far deeper. People, he argues, “require freedom and personal responsibility to live satisfying lives.” That is, the good life requires the liberty to associate with others, choose one's work, own property, and make personal decisions. This is not, he

emphasizes, a call to licentiousness or irresponsibility. To the contrary, "freedom and responsibility are as inseparable as opposite sides of the same coin."

Murray does not ignore or sugarcoat the tough side of liberty. Actions have consequences, and free people must bear the consequences of their actions. But Murray's sterling insight is that this accountability is a positive value. As he puts it: "Responsibility is not the 'price' of freedom but its reward. Responsibility is what keeps our lives from being trivial."

This is a critical point. Freedom is not something that can be appreciated and enjoyed only by a person of good character. Rather, freedom is necessary to *become* a person of good character. It is the opportunity to live up to one's potential. This doesn't mean great achievements in the eyes of others. Emphasizes Murray: "Millions of people find satisfaction every day in doing something well by their own standards."

Thus, the benefits of freedom "are embedded in the very meaning of being human." Men and women must have choice, for choice gives them the opportunity to live full lives. For this reason, liberty is a moral imperative. As Murray puts it, "limited government leaves people with the freedom and responsibility they need to mold satisfying lives both as individuals and as members of families and communities."

Murray goes on to sketch his vision of a limited government. At the federal level, he would maintain the Departments of Defense, Justice, and State, as well as the Environmental Protection Agency. He would drop all regulation of employment, products, and services; he would kill agricultural, art, business, energy, housing, and technology subsidies. He would end the great transfer programs: Medicaid, Medicare, Social Security, and welfare.

Nor does Murray shrink from the tough issues: drugs, pornography, and the like. As he explains, "The question of whether people should be allowed to harm themselves is [simple]. *They must.* To think it is right to use force to override another person's preferences 'for his own good' is the essence of the totalitarian personality." At the same time,

families and communities must be free to protect themselves, but through voluntary, not coercive, means.

Murray's is a radical vision to be sure, but he senses political stirrings in a libertarian direction. Whether he's right or not will become evident in the years ahead.

What It Means to Be a Libertarian is a gem, a wonderfully written, thoughtful, and accessible argument for freedom. Indeed, at a time when many books catalog the failure of government and the efficacy of markets, Murray emphasizes the central moral role of liberty in the human experience: "only freedom enables human beings to live fully human lives." □

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1997 Index of Economic Freedom

by Kim R. Holmes, Bryan T. Johnson, and Melanie Kirkpatrick

The Heritage Foundation and Dow Jones & Company • 1997 • 486 pages • \$24.95

Reviewed by George C. Leef

This is one of the most useful reference works that an advocate of economic freedom can own. What the authors have done, continuing and expanding on a project begun in 1994, is to provide a detailed look at the economies of 150 countries of the world. Only a small number, mainly in Africa and southwestern Asia (recently independent nations formerly part of the Soviet Union), are not analyzed.

The authors have compiled data allowing them to assess each nation's degree of economic freedom in ten categories: trade policy, taxation, government intervention, monetary policy, capital flows and foreign investment, banking policy, wage and price controls, property rights, regulation, and black markets. Based on their analysis, they then categorize each nation as being free, mostly free, mostly unfree, or repressed. Color maps enable the reader to see at a glance where freedom is to be found and where it is not. Alas, you don't