Meliorism: A Contribution to a Libertarian Symposium

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> "My contention is that one has to *weigh the special circumstance of each case*, and cannot safely guide ones' conduct by hard-and-fast rules which know nothing of the *circumstances or character of the people concerned*. Surely, the duty of man is not to do what he can't, but to do the best he can and I believe that, by adopting abstract rules never to do this or that, never to use force, or money or support a Government, or go to war, and by encumbering out consciences with line upon line and precept upon precept, we become less likely to behave reasonably and rightly than if we attended more to those *next steps*, the wisdom of which can be tested in daily life …"
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> Aylmer Maude, in criticism of Leo Tolstoy

This talks is a plea for a revision of the received libertarian attitude to meliorism. By meliorism I understand attempts to remedy or reform specific grievances or defects in a democratic society. Some of what I have to say arose out of reflecting on a book of essays by Paul Goodman. However, this is not a paper on Goodman. I'll refer to his views at the outset and also make exemplary use of his work in some places. But my main interest is in possible libertarian reactions to him, and beyond that, in the standard libertarian attitude to meliorism.

Goodman calls himself a "utopian sociologist," meaning of course to be ironical. He is a self-confessed pragmatist, strongly interested in practical goals and in getting things done. Although at heart he is a social critic, his avowed intention is to combine destructive criticism with positive proposals whose acceptance would improve the object of criticism or even replace it altogether with something better.

" I seem to be able to write only practically, inventing expedients … My way of writing a book of social theory has been to invent community plans. My psychology is a manual of therapeutic exercise. A literary study is a manual of practical criticism. A discussion of human nature is a program of pedagogical and political reforms. This present book is on exception. It is a social criticism, but almost invariably (except in moments of indignation) I find I know what I don't like only by contrast with some concrete proposal that makes sense. " (p. 14)

Goodman is not in the tradition of 18th and 19th century reformers who were obsessed with the idea of a Grand Plan to cure all ills of mankind at one stroke and forever. His thought is therefore

not to be compared to classical anarchism, for he seems interested solely in piecemeal reforms and changes. In modern American society thinking men are faced with a moral dilemma:

> "It is only by the usual technological and organizational procedures that anything can be accomplished. But with these procedures, and the motives and personalities that belong to them, fresh initiative is discouraged and fundamental change is prevented." (page 9)

Goodman rejects the general validity of the premises form which this pessimistic conclusion is drawn, He believes that the shortcoming s and defects of the society in which he lives are **in part** due not to the absences of better alternatives but to an unwillingness seriously to consider and accept certain policies — the policies to which he gives the friendly-ironic label "utopian." This unwillingness is itself not an altogether unchangeable, rock-hard social fact in Goodman's view, Resistance to novelty or to proposals which are or seem radical and disturbing, can itself be studied and understood, and sometimes overcome. Goodman, conscious that all is not for the best in the best of all possible worlds, believes that "something can be done about it!" He thinks that there exist means which, without being self-defeating, are apt to further modest but consequential ends. He calls them "expedients." And reminds us of Goethe's objective: "just to live on a little.." The contrast with Marxist-historicist beliefs in the impossibility of reform within capitalism could hardly be more complete.

How do libertarians react to all this? Differences of interest between Goodman and libertarians are obvious enough. He is much more catholic in his interests than we are. He is concerned with town and community planning, with the aesthetic quality of life and the surrounds of activities; he is interested in the technology and administration of education; in vocational guidance; in psychotherapy; in youth camps; and in many other things which are to the libertarian-in-the-street are either so many unknowns or else hobbies to be pursued unofficially. Some of his preoccupations are then *ab initio* quite unlikely to arouse much enthusiasm in our quarters. Nevertheless we should not overstress the differences. For Goodman is among other things an anti-militarist, a critic of superstitious ideologies, an advocate of sexual freedom and of freedom of expression. We do have a lot in common with what animates the man. In any case if this were less true, libertarians, in view of all their social theory, would still have to accept and meet the challenge of defining their attitude to a reformer of the Goodman mold. We can hardly ignore him just because his interests differ from our own on many points.

I envisage the standard libertarian response to Goodman as a application to a particular case of out general doctrine of anti-reformism. Thus I expect many libertarians would be critical of Goodman's style of thinking, his pragmatism. And I do not mean here criticism of his excesses, his occasional blunders and over-all superficiality. I mean a deep-seated aversion. The reasons for this aversion fall into three rough categories. One, there is thought that meliorism is ineffective: it regularly or characteristically fails of its intended effects, especially when the intended effects are genuinely liberal. Two, in addition to ineffectiveness and perhaps more important than it, meliorism regularly generates unintended and unwanted effects which blight the hope of reformers to have achieved a net improvement in the world by their efforts. Finally, the result of meliorism will be confusion in the mind and behavior of the reformer: his ends, being in conflict, will fall into disarray. And it is predictable that in such an eventuality he will let go of his liberal intentions before letting go of his practical strivings.

Let me consider these points in turn (and not just with special reference to Goodman). My general line will be to suggest that these criticisms are severely overstated and exaggerated ad that the anti-meliorism to which they add up is therefore too indiscriminate.

In considering the charge of ineffectiveness (utopianism in the unfriendly sense) we should distinguish the technical impossibility of proposed politics from their unsuitability to the audience. By technical impossibility I mean that there are, at the time and place in question, no physical, technological, or economic means to the ends envisaged, nor are there any means to the means. Defects under the second heading include the following:

There is no (effective) audience e.g. Domain oratory.

It is the wrong (irrelevant, impotent) audience. Goodman himself provides the example: there is something distinctly odd about propaganda for civic and political proposals being disseminated in literary journals.

There are reasons to believe that the policy is not acceptable to the (right) audience.

It would be patently absurd to argue that all proposals for reform are technically impossible. Most of them, at any rate most of these nowadays put forwards by radicals, dissenters, liberals and democratic socialists in our times are not in this class. In any case there is no rational way of judging the matter *a priori.* The possibility or impossibility of proposals must be assessed as they come up, in the light of the situation to which they are meant to apply. Somewhat more guardedly the same can be said about the unacceptability of meliorist proposals. Whether a policy is or is not acceptable is sometimes a more or less open question which can be settled conclusively only by putting the policy forward and seeing the public reaction. (Goodman implies this when he calls his utopian proposals "hypotheses.") Prescinding from questions of uncertainty there is a second point to be made here. Suppose a proposal passes all reasonable tests, other than acceptability to the appropriate audience. Is advocacy of such a policy unrealistic simply because it is not immediately acceptable to those concerned? The answer is not always yes. If the policy in question is not of thee now-or-never type, if, that is, immediate acceptance and implementation is not of its essence, then even if it is now unacceptable there may be some point of advocating the policy despite opposition or indifference.

Through advocating the policy at a certain time some analogy to it, or some part of it, may become more probable than otherwise, especially at some subsequent time. We know that many piecemeal changes are the result of the cumulative impact of advocacy (and other things) spread over a period. Nor is it necessary that these effects of one's advocacy should be especially calculable.

Inasmuch as the unacceptability of a policy is based on reasons, the advocacy may lower the initial unacceptability. The advocacy of policies may have an educational effect.

Advocating a policy in public may disclose more precisely the obstacles to it. Frequently the reformer or would-be reformer starts off with guesses about the acceptability of his schemes, and he may test his guesses with advocacy. The institutions and social forces of our environment are not always transparent in their workings, sometimes we can find out their responses only by stimulating them.

Finally, take a policy which is otherwise futile in the foreseeable future. Such a policy just by being "on the books" may serve as an ideal or standard by which to judge and evaluate actual or proposed alternatives. (This might be the residual truth in Oscar Wilde's maxim on utopia.)

Though it has been said, I hope, to show that the slogan " reform is always ineffective" will not serve as an adequate basis for a **general** condemnation of meliorism.

John Anderson claimed that

> " … the well-intentioned reformer **always** produces results which he did not anticipate, helps on tendencies to which he is avowedly opposed."

Perhaps this claim is true, but only in a sense too wide to be useful. All social action may have incalculable consequences but what we want to know, in the present context, is whether meliorist action is especially prone to have side-effects. Protest, after all, can and sometimes have unplanned and unwelcome outcomes, for instance the strengthening of repressive laws, but this fact cannot seriously be taken as a global objection to protesting, I don't think the position of reformers is essentially different from that of protesters, although there may be differences of degree. There is perhaps more risk in promoting reforms: it is more calculable that reforms will have incalculable effects than it is that protests will. The degree of risk will depend on the sort of plans advocated, the times and places and styles of advocacy, and other factors. A great deal of difference is made by these details. That is why the argument from unintended consequences is not a knock-down argument against meliorism.

There are two superficial libertarian arguments to be look at under the heading of unintended consequences. First, it will be said that the method of implementing plans of social reform is itself essentially "political," involving compromises, unsavory alliances, and so on. Second, the reformer is obliged, as soon as he meets with the slightest resistance, to lean in an authoritarian direction; to become a meddler who, out of ignorance or righteousness, is inclined to impose his conception of what is desirable.

That the method of effecting plans is political, involving compromises and commitments to allies, not quite kosher, is often the case, and foreseeably so. Whether it is always a sufficient reason for libertarians to reject the action which entails compromises is another question. To me the issue is much more a matter of degree than preserving the purity of an absolute principle. In some circumstances, for some ends, one may weigh the likely cost the compromising against other factors, and come down on the side of action. Two observations are relevant here. (1) Libertarianism is not a "single value" ethic as it has sometimes been made out to be. Freedom or anti-authoritarianism looms large in our thoughts but it is not the only consideration. (I think, for example, that the crucial objections to racial discrimination which libertarians share with others have little to do with liberty and much to do with justice.) Now conflict between various libertarian goods is, *pace* Anderson, possible: frequently reforms pose a challenge to evaluate conflicting ends. (2) Apart from this, even issues of freedom can lead to conflict of ends which require compromise and adjudication. Or set one's face "on principle" against the very possibility of compromise is dogmatic. I suggest that these theoretical considerations are recognized, in a backhanded way, in libertarian practice, although they have no place in our explicit doctrine. It has long been our habit to pick and choose issues and situations on or in which to speak and act, and it frequently happens, more and more of late, that the whole movement lapses into long periods of inactivity for want of the right issues. I diagnose this intermittent existence as due in part to a fear of compromise which is obsessive, a horror of soiling one's political purity. The mistake, if it is a mistake, lies not in the world for being too unkind to us, but in us for being too inflexible and paying too much attention to generalities and too little to the particulars of actual situations.

The reformer is a meddler, tempted by authoritarian means and often succumbing to the temptation. This is also true very often. Again, it is not necessarily true of all meliorists. Hear, for example, Goodman on the grounds of his selection of the filed in which he proposes expedients:

> "characteristically, I choose subjects that are political, personal, or literary problems of practice . . And the problems are my problems., As a writer I am hampered by the present laws on pornography, and as a man and a father, by the sexual climate of that law; so it is a problem for ME. It is as a New Yorker that I propose to ban the cars from the streets and create a city of neighborhoods. As an intellectual man thwarted, I write on the inhibition of grief and anger and look for a therapy to unblock them. And it is because I am hungry for the beauty of a practical and scientific environment that I am dismayed by our 'applied science' and would like to explain it away."
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> " …the content of my own 'arbitrary' proposals is determined by my own justified concerns. I propose what I know to be my business. These are definite and fairly modest aims; whether or not they are practicable remains to be seen."

This does not sound like a meddler speaking. Yet it may be said to the extent to which Goodman shows us a clean pair of hands, just to that extent he is ineffective and bound to remain so. For practical success requires that the reformer should work with and through institutions and seats of power (government, civic authorities, business, parties, trade unions, etc.) In accepting these institutions as part of his means the reformer is also accepting their characteristic ways of working which is authoritarian. In mitigation of this one can answer:

That some reformers (e.g. Goodman) show great awareness of the difficulties and are looking, more hopefully than successfully, for alternatives.

There is a big difference between the State and other institutions as we have always emphasized. There is finally no reason to assume that every political act which is channeled through the State must be authoritarian in its net effects. (I'll bring up some examples later.)

Now to the third objection to meliorism which was that the liberal impulse behind reform activities becomes corrupted in the very course of these activities. Means do not corrupt ends or those whose ends they are, **automatically or mechanically**. Social and psychological causation is more subtle than that. If the attitude of those advocating some reform is a reasonable mean between two extremes, it is at least possible to embark on a course of action without being committed to seeing it through **no matter what**. The extremes are blindly optimistic faith in the power of Reason on the one hand, and a fetishistic preconception about inescapable corruption on the other. A more rational attitude may be located in between. If circumstances change, so should designs, intentions, and determinations. What looks desirable or feasible at one stage, say at the stage of contemplated action, may change at another, and become, through new developments, less desirable, more messy. Then we may consider getting off the bus. Certainly a man who invests his hopes and enthusiasm in a project is less likely to keep a cool head when things become complicated. His sensitivity is liable to be blunted, his patience to become short, his restraint weak. These are psychological commonplaces. But they are not necessities, not invariant phenomena. To say that the liberal impulse of the reformer is likely to wither away is valuable as a warning against dangers which are often not easy to circumvent. And it is, perhaps, just as well to be finicky here. However what we are faced with is a danger, a risk, not the certainty of doom.

Where are we in our argument? The standard libertarian attitude to meliorism is a reaction to 18th and 19th century utopianism and to their aftermath: an exaggerated faith in the welfare state. It seems to me that while the positions to which we react are quite wrong and their underlying assumptions mistaken, it is their contradictory not their contrary which is true. What we criticize in meliorism — the simple-mindedness, the optimism, the meddling, the authoritarian tendencies — are excesses or **abuses**, notwithstanding their frequency; they are overdoses of a medicine which can however be used in the proper quantities. There is a world of difference to my mind between someone like Shaw and, say. Goodman, and I should like to think that we can have a sufficiently sophisticated social theory to take FULL account of the difference. My own view is that we have overlooked the possibility of a "restrained meliorism," which is selective and not committed to either silly beliefs or base actions. The problems as we see it is: what is wrong on general with meliorism? This formulation ought to be scrapped and with it all attempted answers. Instead of trying to convict meliorism **in general** on general grounds, we should try to look at each an every policy, proposal, action, actor, or institution, singly, judging them on their merits. That is, in the full light of the particular relevant historical circumstances, and with the sort of tentativeness or certainty which our knowledge of the particulars warrants. An important consequence of such a reorientation would be this: we could treat the question "Protest or Reform" as to some extent "open." We could recognize that there is not, from the libertarian or any other point of view, a single correct answer covering all situations and all exigencies. This is quite consistent with having a dissident, critical, or oppositionist outlook. We can be protestors or critics, other things being equal; indeed we can prefer this as a *modus operandi* to the committed practicalism exemplified by Goodman. But we should give ourselves more room to move in by allowing for the fact that other things are not always equal and deplorable consequences do not follow from meliorist actions with an iron necessity. Sometimes they don't follow at all. There are plenty of examples. To my mind it is clear that, other things being equal, it is better to have legal homosexuality than illegal, legal abortion than illegal, unrestricted availability of contraceptives rather than restricted, divorce by consent rather than by litigation, little censorship rather than much, multiform rather than uniform censorship, etc., etc. None of these, considered as objectives, is utopian in the context of contemporary Australia, though some are less likely than others. And policies designed to promote these ends and others like then **need** not have any debilitating or corrupting effects, though of course they **could** have them.

Now all this is not to say that libertarians ought to adjourn henceforth to plunge into practical labors, to press for legislation, and so on, let alone that they should go out to manufacture designs for gracious living. I'm not concerned so much with encouraging our activism, as with clarification of our attitudes. Where we do something practical and meliorist is of little account, since obviously our actions depend not only on our convictions and the clarity, sincerity and seriousness with which we hold them, but also on the élan and energy we can muster in acting on these convictions. Political rejuvenation of a bunch of lazy bastards can hardly be expected from a mere symposium. Yet what we say and think about non-libertarian activists could well be modified by accepting into our scheme of things what I have called restrained meliorism.

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