

Mencken's Conservatism

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I. Abstract

Why did H.L. Mencken, the most eloquent and popular of libertarians, have the lowest of expectations for libertarian reform?

One might think that grappling with this question would be a prerequisite of libertarian activism.

One might also think that libertarians would show Mencken — whom they hold in high regard — the respect of dealing with his reasoning, just as they do to statist — whom they do not hold in high regard.

Mencken found such situations amusing, predictable and inoperable.

II. Introduction and Overview

This essay emphasises Mencken's conservatism above his other characteristics, as it is his primary distinguishing feature and the main reason he is misunderstood. His libertarianism — which overlaps with his conservatism — is also misunderstood, but plenty of literature is available defending libertarianism, whereas there is comparatively little intentionally defending conservatism.

Rarely is conservatism even acknowledged as having anything to do with reason, as something that could be right or wrong, justified or unjustified, probable or improbable. Usually it is uncritically dismissed as skeptical, iconoclastic, irreverent, curmudgeonly, eccentric, outspoken, opinionated, independent, sardonic, pessimistic, cynical, bitter and dated. Mencken is described in those terms — which are more comparative and superficial than descriptive and explanatory — far more often than he is described as correct and critical, or, for that matter, as incorrect and uncritical.

Mencken is not just different. He does not merely have a valid point of view. His conservatism is not a blind faith in pessimism; it was not of immaculate conception. It is not pessimistic. His viewpoint can be analysed, not only to compare his conclusions with your own, but to compare his reasoning too.

Mencken was a conservative. He doubted the goodness, honesty and truth of all government and any religion. Despite the difference between this and what is usually called conservatism, this is the true conservatism. After all, government and religion, being proactive, hope-fuelled and high-expectation responses to whatever the situation happened to be at the time of their founding, are merely examples of historical anticonservatism.

In addition to a critical predisposition and lack of faith, Mencken's conservatism is also an unashamed appreciation of the entertainment provided by: (1) the pretentiousness of both historical and current events; and (2) the hollowness of attempted improvements, including those that will fail

due to irrevocable economic laws — that is, socialistic interventions into the market —, and those that will fail due to unpopularity — that is, reforms that would work, if only the populace were not so stubbornly stupid.

To rephrase and reframe, Mencken believed: (a) that many problems are insoluble; (b) that many other problems have solutions that would work, but are unlikely to be adopted; (c) that “problems” are often misidentified, or exaggerated in both severity and urgency; (d) that “solutions” are rarely as useful as their believers claim; (e) that if people have free will, they rarely use it wisely and are predictably corruptible, gullible and unreflective; (f) that there will always be “do-gooders” who try to do the impossible and unlikely, and are blindly enthusiastic about their chances; (g) that these “do-gooders” often sink to the level they try to get others to rise above; (h) that not much can be done about these “do-gooders,” and it is usually best not to; (i) that all this has been the case in the past and will be so in the future; and (j) that all this is fun to witness and proclaim.

Mencken's fervour was this-worldly. His cynicism was light-hearted and deeply-felt. His pessimism was upbeat and vigilant. His paranoia was fuelled by neither hope nor fear. His crusade against error and injustice was devoid of envy. He was passionate and questioning and resigned and satisfied. This position is almost always confused with what it is not. Even those who hold such beliefs often find explaining themselves, or keeping silent, too difficult and inconvenient, requiring more intelligence than they possess or independence than they can muster. Acceptance concerns them more than honesty or education. They categorise their behaviour using categories and clichés they have come across, rather than their own immediate sincere reflections. Lacking the language necessary to express themselves or the discipline necessary to be silent until they find the right words, they either cease interest altogether in what gave them these difficulties, or classify themselves as something they are not. If they do the latter, they often change their beliefs until they share all the views of the group that they, originally incorrectly, classed themselves with. Consider, for example, the descriptions in the previous paragraph, how rarely you find the terms therein collocated, your initial reaction — which may have been that they are contradictory — and your reappraisal — which may be that it actually makes surprisingly good sense.

Mencken's inventive language, ducking and weaving of unhelpful idioms, and enlarged vocabulary, do much to explain why his beliefs go beyond, say, the professed faith in democracy, whatever that means, of others; and why his prose is, as he said, “clear and alive.” For example:

The imbeciles who have printed acres of comment on my books have seldom noticed the chief character of my style. It is that I write with almost scientific precision — that my meaning is never obscure. The ignorant have often complained that my vocabulary is beyond them, but that is simply because my ideas cover a wider range than theirs do. Once they have consulted the dictionary they always know exactly what I intend to say. I am as far as any writer can get from the muffled sonorities of, say, John Dewey.¹

III. Mencken's Motives and Expectations

In this essay, I quote many passages from Mencken's writings, not despite their similarities, but because of them. Where I find different eloquent passages where he makes the same point, I include them all, because that itself makes many a point. Specifically, it provides evidence for these controversial and unpopular beliefs: (1) that a critical, cynical and pessimistic person can sincerely enjoy holding and expressing critical, cynical and pessimistic beliefs; (2) that such beliefs need be no disincentive to productivity or obstacle to satisfaction; (3) that a low opinion is justified of the

1 H.L. Mencken, *Minority Report* (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 293.

reading public, including attempts to educate them; and (4) that a low opinion is also justified of the government the reading public is part of and supports.

Mencken was published prolifically in popular places, yet most of his beliefs were still misunderstood. Even if his aim was not primarily to educate the masses, critics will have a tough time finding where his low opinion of the masses is wrong and what he could have done better to educate them — for example, could his prose have had more appeal, bite, clarity, directness or eloquence, and could he have repeated his viewpoint more?

Mencken believed that readers didn't only need to be given a message once, but that it was unlikely they would get it at all. He repeatedly made the same observations simply for the sake of art, habit and amusement. He wrote on pedagogical, political and moral issues without any pedagogical, political or moral purpose. He was a critic of novels, but he never wrote one. He was a critic of America's defence policy, but he was not a German spy. He was a critic of Presidents, but he never became one. His objectivity made him suspect, because reason is rarely comprehended, and is not represented by any political party, job description, university qualification or cultural group. It also explains why many people failed to see that, despite never writing a novel, running for office or launching a revolution, he still had many good ideas for those who did.

Leading by example means your followers are looking at the back of your head. Mencken faced up to people, and told them what he was thinking.

Mencken was a libertarian theorist of the highest rank, but only an incidental activist. He did not believe that he could be a successful activist, and it was not one of his primary aims. He advocated libertarianism because that was what he believed to be the truth, not because he thought it was attainable, or something people wanted to, needed to or should hear. More than an academic, activist or job-holder, he considered himself an artist or animal, someone "diseased" with the thirst for truth and aesthetic sense.²

Here is some autobiographical insight from Mencken:

[A]n author, like any other so-called artist, is a man in whom the normal vanity of all men is so vastly exaggerated that he finds it a sheer impossibility to hold it in ... Such is the thing called self-expression ... The vanity of man is quite illimitable. In every act of life, however trivial, and particularly in every act which pertains to his profession, he takes all the pride of a baby learning to walk. It may seem incredible but it is nevertheless a fact that I myself get great delight out of writing such banal paragraphs as this one.³

And:

I have never tried to convert anyone to anything. Like any other man bawling from a public stamp I have occasionally made a convert; in fact, in seasons when my embouchure has been good I have made a great many. But not deliberately, not with any satisfaction ... I am,

2 H.L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York: Vintage, 1982), pp. 442-49; see also H.L. Mencken, *Prejudices: Fourth Series* (New York: Octagon Books, 1985), pp. 269-77. A note on my referencing of Mencken: Much, but not all, of his work has been reprinted in many different essay versions and compilations. I only reference one location for each specific passage, based on my estimate of: (1) its most popular current location; and (2) where the best relevant discussion is. The *Chrestomathies* often include only part of a larger discussion, sometimes excising the best bits. I may reference and quote multiple locations for where Mencken makes the same point, but only ever one location when he makes the same point in the same way, as per the two criteria explained in the previous sentence.

3 *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 466; and H.L. Mencken, *A Second Mencken Chrestomathy*, ed. Terry Teachout (New York: Knopf, 1995), p. 489; see also H.L. Mencken, *In Defense of Women* (New York: Knopf, 1927), pp. 77-78.

in fact, the complete anti-Messiah, and detest converts as much as I detest missionaries. My writings, such as they are, have had only one purpose: to attain for H.L. Mencken that feeling of tension relieved and function achieved which a cow enjoys on giving milk.⁴

And again:

It has ... been assumed on frequent occasions that I have some deep-lying reformatory purpose in me ... My one purpose in writing ... is simply to provide a kind of katharsis for my own thoughts. They worry me until they are set forth in words. This may be a kind of insanity, but at all events it is free of moral purpose. I am never much interested in the effects of what I write. It may seem incredible in an old book reviewer, but it is a fact that I seldom read with any attention the reviews of my own books. Two times out of three I know something about the reviewer, and in very few cases have I any respect for his judgements. Thus his praise, if he praises me, is subtly embarrassing, and his denunciation, if he denounces, leaves me unmoved. I can't recall any review that ever influenced me in the slightest.⁵

And yet again:

What actually urges [a "scientific investigator"] on is not some brummagen idea of Service, but a boundless, almost pathological thirst to penetrate the unknown, to uncover the secret, to find out what has not been found out before. His prototype is not the liberator releasing slaves, the good Samaritan lifting up the fallen, but a dog sniffing tremendously at an infinite series of rat-holes.⁶

Another:

The lust to improve the world is simply not in me ... This attitude, I find, is incomprehensible to most Americans, and so they assume that it is a mere cloak for a secret altruism. If I describe the Fundamentalists *con amore*, dwelling luxuriously upon their astounding imbecilities, their pathetic exploitation by mountebanks, I am set down at once as one full of indignation against them, and eager to drag them to the light ... Such spectacles do not make me indignant; they simply interest me immensely, as a pathologist, say, is interested by a beautiful gastric ulcer. It is, perhaps, a strange taste — that is, in a country of reformers. But there it is.⁷

And another:

I am not, in fact, protesting against anything. I am simply *describing* something, not even in sorrow, but simply as a specialist in human depravity.⁸

And yet another:

["Personal Notice":] Not a cent of my funds shall ever be devoted, with my consent, to the uplift of my fellow men. Never willingly shall I give any aid, direct or indirect, to the spread

4 *A Second Mencken Chrestomathy*, pp. 483-84, 491. The second half of the paragraph Mencken wrote for use in his obituary.

5 H.L. Mencken, *The Diary of H.L. Mencken*, ed. Charles A. Fecher (New York: Knopf, 1990), p. 133; see also *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 438.

6 *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 12.

7 H.L. Mencken, *The Impossible H.L. Mencken*, ed. Marion Elizabeth Rodgers (New York: Anchor, 1991), pp. 682-83.

8 H.L. Mencken, *A Gang of Pecksniffs*, ed. Theo Lippman, Jr. (New York: Arlington House, 1977), p. 70.

of Christian snivelization in any part of the world.⁹

And one more:

I delight in argument, not because I want to convince, but because argument itself is an end ... I can't understand the martyr. Far from going to the stake for a Great Truth, I wouldn't even miss a meal for it ... The man who boasts that he habitually tells the truth is simply a man with no respect for it. It is not a thing to be thrown about loosely.¹⁰

What could be more knowingly and enduringly libertarian than this conscious, primary, persevering and worldly self-interest? A martyr dies for an undying truth — the only genuine chance of attracting attention through martyrdom comes from its novelty value, and even that is dying. A libertarian need not be disadvantaged by his beliefs. Mencken was never romantic enough to imagine that disadvantageous treatment would have a silver lining for the future. When his ideas were militantly unpopular, as in wartime, he was happily quiet on those issues.¹¹ When his writing was merely accused of leading to a few suicides or his permanent unwelcome in the South, he wrote more of the same.¹²

Mencken neither ruled out the possibility and success of a libertarian revolution, nor thought it would happen soon. His expectations were invariably conservative:

On some bright tomorrow, a geological epoch or two hence, [citizens] will come to the end of their endurance [of government] ... [The libertarian utopia] will be realized in the world twenty or thirty centuries after I have passed from these scenes and taken up my public duties in Hell ... The extortions and oppressions of government will go on so long as [the victims] are ready to swallow the immemorial official theory that protesting against the stealings of the archbishop's secretary's nephew's mistress's illegitimate son is a sin against the Holy Ghost ... In other words, they will come to an end on the Tuesday following the first Monday of November preceding the Resurrection Morn.¹³

Mencken saw through even the most popularly lauded revolutions, observing:

Politics, as hopeful men practise it in the world, consists mainly of the delusion that a change in form is a change of substance. The American colonists, when they got rid of the Potsdam tyrant, believed fondly that they were getting rid of oppressive taxes forever and setting up complete liberty. They found almost instantly that taxes were higher than ever, and before many years they were writhing under the Alien and Sedition Acts.¹⁴

And:

Political revolutions do not often accomplish anything of genuine value; their one undoubted effect is simply to throw out one gang of thieves and put in another... [T]he American colonies gained little by their revolt in 1776 ... Under the British hoof they would have got on just as well, and probably a great deal better ...¹⁵

9 H.L. Mencken, *The Gist of Mencken*, ed. Mayo DuBasky (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1990), p. 50.

10 H.L. Mencken, *Letters of H.L. Mencken*, ed. Guy J. Fargue (New York: Knopf, 1961), pp. 189-88; and *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 15; see also *A Second Mencken Chrestomathy*, pp. 352-53. On the last sentence quoted, see also George Jean Nathan, *Testament of a Critic* (New York: Knopf, 1931), pp. 55-56.

11 See, for example: *The Diary of H.L. Mencken*, pp. 156, 207, 263; and *Letters of H.L. Mencken*, pp. 161, 453, 476.

12 *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, pp. 132-33, 184.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 148, 146; and *Prejudices: Fourth Series*, p. 236.

14 *Prejudices: Fourth Series*, pp. 227-28.

15 *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, pp. 145-46.

That the revolt may have been justified is one thing; whether it led to improved conditions, including less taxation, is another. The revolt was an overreaction: it does not follow from negotiations proving fruitless, that people should be made armless, legless and headless.

Mencken believed that reforms create, re-form and worsen what they rail against, and that revolutions just go in circles:

[The mob] looks for leaders with the necessary courage, and when they appear it follows them slavishly, even after their courage is discovered to be mere buncombe and their altruism only a cloak for more and worse oppressions. Thus it oscillates eternally between scoundrels, or, if you would take them at their own valuation, heroes. Politics becomes the trade of playing upon its natural poltroonery — of scaring it half to death, and then proposing to save it. There is in it no other quality of which a practical politician, taking one day with another, may be sure. Every theoretically free people wonders at the slavishness of all the others. But there is no actual difference between them.¹⁶

And:

The demagogue argues (*a*) that the rules were made by wicked men, and (*b*), that if enough nickels are dropped into his hat he will be able to change them. The first part is false pretenses and the second part is fraud. There is nothing else whatsoever. To be sure, a given demagogue may sometimes convince himself that he is honest and even that he is a hero, but what he thinks is of no more validity than what he says.

His actual purpose is never concealed from the judicious. He is always after a job for himself, and if talks loudly enough and foolishly enough he not infrequently gets it. There then begins a cycle of inevitable disillusion. His poor victims, reaching out for the moon, find out to their disquiet that what he has really handed them is only a cabbage. He must then begin to promise two moons, three moons, a dozen moons, with clusters of other gauds thrown in for good measure. They turn out to be onions, potatoes, wads of reconditioned chewing gum, wet sponges. Presently the demagogue is chased away — and another rises to fill his room. This has been going on in the world since Hector was a blastocyte. It will go on until the last galoot's ashore.

The More Abundant Life brethren now face the first stirring of serious doubt in their customers. They have been assailed by naughty skeptics since the day of their emergence from primeval chaos, but persons of a congenitally believing turn of mind, which is to say, persons of normal human stupidity, have hitherto gone along with them pretty docilely. But now they find themselves confronted by rising dubieties, and it is necessary for them to do something to hold on to their soft and glorious jobs. The half of what they do consists in shoveling out more and more billions of the taxpayers' money. The other half consists in beating the woods for new coveys and classifications of suckers.¹⁷

Reformers and revolutionists are like racing car drivers, believing that if they are the fastest to complete a number of repetitions, then the starting line will magically turn into the finishing line and all will be well.

Although Mencken was not what is commonly called an egalitarian, his belief in the likeness of all politicians, reforms and governments, and the people they are supported by and consist of, shows

16 H.L. Mencken, *Notes on Democracy* (New York: Knopf, 1926), p. 50.

17 H.L. Mencken, *On Politics*, ed. Malcolm Moos (New York: Vintage, 1960), pp. 312-13.

that he is actually more egalitarian than those who claim themselves to be radically so:

I believe that all government is evil, and that trying to improve it is largely a waste of time ... [G]overnments are much alike the world over, whether they be called communist or conservative. They do the same thing that seems likely to save their faces and they do it regardless of creed, principle or previous protestation ... [The] primary error [of “the whole American people”] lies in making the false assumption that some politicians are better than others ... [A] good politician is as unthinkable as an honest burglar ... [Those who argue for the possibility of respectable politicians and their success] simply argue, in words but little changed, that the remedy for prostitution is to fill the bawdy-houses with virgins.¹⁸

Nor did Mencken have much faith in attempts to decrease political scandals, believing revolution, reform, electioneering, lobbying and protesting to be inherently scandalous:

Why should democracy rise against bribery? It is itself a form of wholesale bribery ... [I]t sets up a government that is a mere function of the mob’s vagaries, and that maintains itself by constantly bargaining with those vagaries. Its security depends wholly upon providing satisfactory bribes for the prehensile minorities that constitute the mob, or that have managed to deceive and inflame the mob. One day the labour leaders — a government within the general government — must be bought with offices; the next day the dupes of these labour leaders must be bought with legislation, usually of a sort loading the ordinary scales of justice in their favour; the day after there must be something for the manufacturers, for the Methodists, for the Catholics, for the farmers ... The whole process of government under democracy, as everyone knows, is a process of similar trading. The very head of the state, having no title to his office save that which lies in the popular will, is forced to haggle and bargain like the lowliest office-seeker.¹⁹

This attitude toward revolution, reform, scandal-preventing and government in general are not found in the placards, policy proposals or position papers of political parties, think tanks, stump speeches, government departments, magazines, newspapers or universities. Mencken is usually only quoted for comic relief, to attract initial interest and to add a shroud of cynicism, when providing the very direction of their works, or replacing them, would result in superior accuracy, eloquence and consistency. People talk about sweetening the pill, but the more common arrangement is that a message is so sickly sweet and full of fluff, that to convince their audience that there’s something to it, they bitter the placebo or mask the sugar overdose, hiding the untruth with a truth, which they fail to respect for anything but its fresh tone. As Mencken said, “The truth, to the overwhelming majority of mankind, is indistinguishable from a headache.”²⁰ With the right treatment, it can go away. With the right environment, it is not a problem. It is handy as an excuse when wriggling out of something, but that is all.

To sum up Mencken's motives and expectations: he generally acted out of pure vanity, and discerned that if he had any other aim, it would probably be in vain anyway.

IV. Mencken's Conservatism and Christianity

In perhaps the best distillation of Mencken's conservatism, he suggested everyone live not quite sober and not quite drunk, but “gently stewed.” He explained what this solution entails:

18 *On Politics*, p. 112; *The Gist of Mencken*, p. 509; *Prejudices: Fourth Series*, pp. 133, 130; and *A Second Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 32.

19 *Notes on Democracy*, pp. 180-81.

20 *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 149.

Putting a brake upon all the qualities which enable us to get on in the world and shine before our fellows — for example, combativeness, shrewdness, diligence, ambition —, it releases the qualities which mellow us and make our fellows love us — for example, amiability, generosity, toleration, humor, sympathy. A man who has taken aboard two or three cocktails is less competent than he was before to steer a battleship down the Ambrose Channel, or to cut off a leg, or to draw a deed of trust, or to conduct Bach's B minor mass, but he is immensely more competent to entertain a dinner party, or to admire a pretty girl, or to *hear* Bach's B minor mass.²¹

Of course, Mencken never would have forcefully implemented such a policy, launched a campaign for its adoption, practised it himself during working hours or expected it to be popularly or influentially supported. He simply mentions it because it is fun, makes sense, reads well and gets a point across. It was only by such stretches of the imagination that he could be perceived as anything other than a conservative libertarian. He was so conservative and opposed to politics that even the lure, in 1914, of "\$30,000 cash ... to write anti-Prohibition speeches for the illiterates in the two Houses of Congress"²² was insufficient.

Mencken considered many problems of the world to be caused by indignation, but he never got too indignant about it. He saw that indignation is like magic: people are tricked into seeing things from a limited and misleading angle, and as a result they believe the impossible is possible and the difficult easy.

Mencken claimed that universal imbibing would have biblical results, "My proposal would restore Christianity to the world."²³ This reference to Christianity has much weight to it, including absence of pride, equality under G-d, and, most obviously, the immortal words of the Apostle Paul, which Mencken often referenced, "Drink no water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities" (*I. Timothy* 5:23, see also *I. Corinthians* 11:25). There is also Christianity's generally pessimistic — that is, accurate — treatment of man. Here are some supporting excerpts from the old and new testaments:

According to highest authority, "the imagination of man's heart *is* evil from his youth" (*Genesis* 8:21). Moses — who had a direct relationship with G_d — observed, "while I am yet alive with you this day, ye have been rebellious against the Lord; and how much more after my death?" (*Deuteronomy* 31:27). We are later advised, "*It is better to trust in the Lord [an incorporeality and creator of man] than to put confidence in man [who else is to interpret and pass down to us the teachings of G-d?]*" (*Psalms* 118:8). King Solomon claimed, "Favour *is* deceitful, and beauty *is* vain" (*Proverbs* 31:30); and, "in much wisdom *is* much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" (*Ecclesiastes* 1:18). John quotes Jesus admitting, "If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?" (*John* 3:12). And unsurprisingly, in light of all this, John said of those who actually witnessed the miracles of Jesus — not merely heard of them thousands of years later (as Moses said earlier) — "But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him" (*John* 12:37, see also such passages as *Mark* 16:11-14 and *Luke* 24:11, and also *Romans* 3:12-17). Now initially it appears that any religion that believes in the authenticity, sanctity and truth of any of these observations would have quite a difficult time attracting supporters. When it comes to finding followers, it would appear from the previous quotes that they don't and didn't expect any. But on reflection, if people are as

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 388-89.

22 H.L. Mencken, *Newspaper Days* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. xi

23 *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 391. Another example of Mencken's Holy Wit is his proposal for random election (*Ibid.*, pp. 378-80) and random marriage (*Ibid.*, pp. 58-60). Such revered Catholics as Cervantes, Saint Thomas More and G.K. Chesterton endorsed it, as I illustrate in my unpublished, "A Proposal for Electoral Reform."

error-prone as this paragraph suggests, then the opposite is more likely to be true. And don't forget this line

Furthermore, there are biblical passages which seem to say that because of our, or merely our parents, or even our great-grandparents ignorance or wickedness, we are cursed: “Woe unto you, when all man shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets” (*Luke* 6:26) and; “If ye will not hear, and if ye will not lay *it* to heart, to give glory unto my name, saith the Lord of hosts, I will even send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings: yea, I have cursed them already, because ye do not lay *it* to heart. Behold, I will corrupt your seed” (*Malachi* 2:2-3); and “I the Lord thy God *am* a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth *generation* of them that hate me” (*Exodus* 20:5, repeated at *Exodus* 34:7 and *Deuteronomy* 5:9). Mencken agreed, saying, “The only really safe skeptic is of the third generation: his grandfather must have taken the Devil’s shilling as a bachelor.”²⁴ But honestly, Mencken's interpretation of God's Will slightly differed from the biblical passages above, believing omission rather than commission to be His Will Manifest. Mencken empathised, “Do I let the *chandala* suffer, and consign them, as old Friedrich used to say, to statistics and the devil? Well, so does God.”²⁵ Consider also this passage:

[Quack doctors attract people with] defective reasoning powers. They slaughter these unfortunates by the thousand ... Does anyone seriously contend that this butchery is anti-social? It seems to me to be quite the reverse. The race is improved as its misfits and half-wits are knocked off. And life is thereby made cheaper and safer for the rest of us. [Otherwise, we] carry them on our backs [and then] they multiply gloriously, and so burden our children and grandchildren ... Thus a genuinely enlightened State would endow Christian Science and chiropractic on eugenic principles, as our great universities already endow football. Failing that, it is the plain duty of statesmanship to let nature take its course.²⁶

Mencken blasphemes that the creator of man Himself is imperfect:

Man’s limitations are also visible in his gods. Yahveh seems to have had His hands full with the Devil from the start. His plans for Adam and Eve went to pot, and He failed again with Noah. His worst failure came when He sent His only-begotten Son into the world to rescue man from sin. It would be hard to imagine any scheme falling further from success.²⁷

At least He hasn’t tried it again recently. He doesn’t try it every election season and oftener, as mere man does.

Mencken summarised, “Every failure teaches a man something, to wit, that he will probably fail again next time.”²⁸ Of course, this is the “ought” rather than the “is” of the case, for what most people learn from failure is nothing at all; they just go on failing. They believe that the wrong path

24 H.L. Mencken, *Treatise on the Gods* (New York: Knopf, 1930), p. 333.

25 *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 618.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 344-46; see also pp. 376-77, where Mencken credits the Black Death with the Renaissance.

27 *Minority Report*, p. 260.

28 *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 617. For a similar sentiment, see David Cecil, *The Young Melbourne* (Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1939), p. 254-55. There is also Aldous Huxley’s comment, “That men do not learn very much from history is the most important of all the lessons that history has to teach.” From: “A Case of Voluntary Ignorance,” *Complete Essays of Aldous Huxley*, vol. VI (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), p. 59. See also such texts as: H.J. Haskell, *The New Deal in Old Rome* (New York: Knopf, 1947), esp. pp. 237-241; James Henry Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1934), esp. p. 223; and Robert Scheuttinger and Eamonn Butler, *Forty Centuries of Wage and Price Controls: How not to fight inflation* (Wash., D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 1979), esp. p. 150.

leads to the right path; that after a storm things clear up; that it is darkest before the dawn; that the roses of success grow from the ashes of failure; that every clouded mind has a silver lining, which is not merely old age; and that old age itself has a silver lining. Mistakes made are confused with lessons learnt. As Mencken said, “The older I grow the more I distrust the familiar doctrine that age brings wisdom.”²⁹ People believe that “The cure for the evils of democracy is more democracy.”³⁰ And democracy itself consists of attempts “to remedy the irremediable, to succor the unsuccorable, to unscramble the unscrambleable, to dephlogisticate the unde-phlogisticatable ... to solve the insoluble and unscrew the inscrutable.”³¹

For a final comment on Mencken’s Christianity, Benjamin De Casseres observed:

Mencken is so completely civilized that he will not even respond to his critics. He turns the other cheek to them, and with impudent boyishness says, “Smack this one!” He is the only man I know who subtly reconciles two of Christ’s heretofore irreconcilable sayings — to turn the other cheek and I bring not peace, but a sword.³²

V. Romanticism Rests on Two False Premises

Mencken believed that most of the debates about politics, religion, science, philosophy, aesthetics and other issues rest on false premises that make all their squabbles merely petty infighting. Here is a brief tour of his commentary on this:

Religion — “Every religion of any consequence, indeed, teaches that all the rest are insane, immoral and against God. Usually it is not hard to prove it.”³³

And: “Evil is that which one believes of others. It is a sin to believe evil of others, but it is seldom a mistake.”³⁴

Philosophy — “Philosophy consists very largely of one philosopher arguing that all others are jackasses. He usually proves it, and I should add that he usually proves that he is one himself.”³⁵

Politics — conflicting parties spend much of their time “trying to prove that the other party is unfit to rule — and both commonly succeed, and are right.”³⁶

29 H.L. Mencken, *Prejudices: Third Series* (New York: Octagon Books, 1985), p. 311.

30 *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 154.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 150; and *Minority Report*, p. 199.

32 Benjamin De Casseres, *Mencken and Shaw* (New York: Silas Newton, 1930), p. 10.

33 *Treatise on the Gods*, p. 343. In Sara Mayfield's *The Constant Circle: H.L. Mencken and His Friends* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 2003), p. 90, the author states, “One of the resident psychics, an English spiritualist, took [Mencken] aside to warn him that most of the American mediums at the camp were quacks.” A similar passage is found in François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. Burton Raffel (New York: Norton, 1991), bk. 4, ch. 18, p. 428: “The next day, on our starboard side, we met up with nine old tub boats full of monks — Dominicans, Jesuits, Capuchins, Hermits, Augustinians, Bernardines, Celestines, Theatines, Egnatins, Amadeans, Franciscans, Carmelites, Minims, and monks named for all the other holy saints — who were on their way to the Crazy Council, where they were going to polish up the articles of faith so they could deal with new styles of heretics.” Also of interest is the Cardiff Giant, a 10ft petrified man that was a fake, of which a fake was made, and the parties of both fakes claiming that the other was a fake. And the McCarthyite communist restrictions on free speech to track down communists. And the crazy psychiatric practise of calling others mentally ill, even when malingering.

34 *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 617.

35 *Minority Report*, p. 48.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 222. Similarly, Edmund Burke, when he was a true conservative, said, “The Aristocratical, Monarchical, and Popular Partizans have been jointly laying their Axes to the Root of all Government, and have in their Turns proved each other absurd and inconvenient.” [From Edmund Burke, *A Vindication of Natural Society*, in his *Pre-*

Patriotism — “If it is the duty of a young man to serve his country ... then it is equally the duty of an enemy young man to serve *his*.”³⁷

Mencken identified two significant delusions among debaters in these and other diverse departments of thought. They will be dealt with, one at a time, in the following sub-sections. Both these delusions are of particular significance in explaining his conservatism. They explain why romantics rarely question both their own solutions and the very existence of solutions at all. They explain why Mencken believed, “The fact that I have no remedy for all the sorrows of the world is no reason for my accepting yours. It simply supports the strong possibility that yours is a fake.”³⁸

1. Tender Minds Rarely Become Tough Minds: Exposing Error is Not Discovering Truth

Mencken explained:

The race of men is sharply divided into two classes: those who are what James called tough-minded, and demand proofs before they will believe, and those who are what he called tender-minded, and are willing to believe anything that seems to be pleasant [and give their life meaning] ... They find it wholly impossible to distinguish between what is subjectively agreeable and what is objectively true. Would it be nice if the whole world turned sober overnight, and even flappers put away the jug? If so, then there must be a quick and sure way to accomplish it. Does Prohibition promise to do so, then Prohibition must be true ...

[W]ho has ever heard of a Socialist who did not also believe in some other quackery [in addition to socialism]? I have known all the principal gladiators of the movement in my time, at least in America; I have yet to meet one who was not as gullible as a Mississippi darkey, nay, even a Mississippi white man. Didn't Karl Marx himself carry a madstone and believe in astrology? If not, then it was strange indeed. Didn't Debs believe that quinine would cure a cold? If not, then he was not a genuine Socialist.³⁹

Mencken did admit that believers do not believe everything. But, he explains, even when an error is found in one belief, that rarely means a change for the better:

So long as there are men in the world, 99 percent of them will be idiots, and so long as 99 percent of them are idiots they will thirst for religion, and so long as they thirst for religion it will remain a weapon over them. I see no way out. If you blow up one specific faith, they will embrace another. And if, by any magic, you purge them of pious credulity altogether, they will simpl[y] swallow worse nonsense in some other department.⁴⁰

Revolutionary Writings, ed. Ian Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 42.] And here's a relevant joke, of unknown origin: The protest vote is so rampant nowadays that if most current parties and politicians had run unopposed they would never have got in.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 173.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

39 H.L. Mencken, *Prejudices: Sixth Series* (New York: Octagon Books, 1985), pp. 97-102. Similarly, in George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, ch. 11, “[T]here is the horrible — the really disquieting — prevalence of cranks wherever Socialists are gathered together. One sometimes gets the impression that the mere words ‘Socialism’ and ‘Communism’ draw towards them with magnetic force every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, ‘Nature Cure’ quack, pacifist, and feminist in England.”

40 H.L. Mencken, *The New Mencken Letters*, ed. Carl Bode (New York: The Dial Press, 1977), p. 76. Similar to this and the surrounding Mencken passages quoted, Eric Hoffer said, “When people are ripe for a mass movement, they are usually ripe for any effective movement, and not solely for one with a particular doctrine or programme.” Hoffer elaborated and provided historical examples in his *The True Believer* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1952), p. 29 and on. Here's another angle on the same from Albert Jay Nock, *The State of the Union*, ed. Charles H. Hamilton (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), p. 274: “[D]emocratic' State practice is nothing more or less than State practice.

And:

I do not admire the general run of American Bible-searchers — Methodists, United Brethren, Baptists, and such vermin. But try to imagine what the average low-browed Methodist would be if he were not a Methodist ... They submit perfectly voluntarily, and their submission is inherent in their nature ... [I]t is their eternal fate, laid upon them by a just and prudent God, to have soft and believing minds ... The precise nature of the nonsense that such folks believe is of small consequence; the only condition that they lay down is that it must be incredible. Dissuade them from the notion that Jonah swallowed the whale, and they will succumb to the theory that it is a sin to go fishing on Sunday. Purge them of this, and they will begin to patronize a spiritualist. Jail the spiritualist, and they become Socialists. And all the while they believe that Friday is an unlucky day, that a nutmeg carried in the pocket will ward off rheumatism, and that a horse-hair bottled in water will turn into a snake. Thus it seems to me a vain enterprise to rescue them from the clutches of the Rev. clergy, and a folly to protest sentimentally ... [W]hy should anyone want to change what they believe into something else? Is their religion idiotic? Then their science would also be idiotic.⁴¹

And again:

[T]he assumption that the exposure of an error is identical with the discovery of the truth — that error and truth are simply opposites. They are nothing of the sort. What the world turns to, when it has been cured of one error, is usually simply another error, and maybe one worse than the first one. This is the whole history of the intellect in brief. The average man of to-day does not believe in precisely the same imbecilities that the Greek in the Fourth Century before Christ believed in, but the things that he *does* believe in are often quite as idiotic.⁴²

An amusing thought follows: “Think of the men jailed, clubbed, hanged, burned at the stake — not for embracing error, but for embracing the *wrong* error.”⁴³

It is wrong to equate the ability to see a problem or an error with the ability to see a solution or a truth.

Fact may sometimes get in the way of fiction, but what usually requires evasion or “correction” is an incompatible fiction. Facts are rarely known, let alone identified.

If you steer clear of one thing, you just end up in the firing line of something else, and you are not as prepared to deal with it.

It does not differ from Marxist State practice, Fascist State practice, or any other.”

41 A Mencken Chrestomathy, p. 90; *The Gist of Mencken*, pp. 211-12; and H.L. Mencken, *On Religion*, ed. S.T. Joshi (New York: Prometheus, 2002), p. 35. Similarly, Ralph Waldo Emerson said in “New England Reformers,” in his *Essays: Second Series* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, & Co., 1855), p. 254: “If I should go out of the church whenever I hear a false sentiment, I could never stay there five minutes. But why come out? the street is as false as the church.”

42 *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 434. Similarly, Wyndham Lewis said, in *The Art of Being Ruled*, ed. Reed Way Dasenbrock (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), p. 151: “People ask nothing better than to be types — occupational types, social types, functional types of any sort. If you force them not to be, they are miserable ... And if so forced (be some interfering philanthropist or unintelligent reformer) to abandon some cliché, all men ... take the first opportunity to take their cliché back, or to get another one.”

43 *The Gist of Mencken*, p. 276.

When people acknowledge that they have made an error, they often incorrectly assume that just because they have successfully identified one mistake, they must not have made any others. When a conservative finds an error his emotions, expectations and plans rarely change; he knows about error and expects it. When a romantic spots an error, he jumps on it. His confidence grows. He is surprised, and indignant. He writes to “his” politician. He writes a letter to the editor: on every issue every day — unless a more pressing obligation intervenes. He responds to politician’s press releases to the politician himself. He begins to think about other ideas he has and how his ability to find error in others must be a hint that he has much more to offer them. Having seen how wrong other people are, he then magically infers that they are intelligent, receptive and interested enough to see where they are wrong and mend their ways. He conducts brainstorming sessions with those who agree with him, and tries to map out every argument against his point of view with a tailored irrefutable response. He writes a book, and then has a series of book launches, so that he may intelligently discuss his book with those who haven’t read it yet. He starts a think tank, a yearly conference and a monthly magazine. He thinks the error can be prevented, corrected, combated. A conservative may also do many of these things, but he has other aims in addition to preaching and does not have such high expectations.

Reform is not necessarily improvement. Addressing an illness is not necessarily allaying it. Loudness is not necessarily effectiveness. The popular is not necessarily the right. People often forget that the human race has great potential, for getting worse; and that things are rarely so bad that they can’t worsen.

Reforms and revolution do one of seven things: (1) *prolong* what they are trying to prevent, like the drunk soldier who put up more flags⁴⁴; (2) *repeat* what they are trying to prevent, like Diogenes comprehensively, ingeniously and methodically dealing with his rain barrel in the manner of political enthusiasms⁴⁵; (3) *continue* what they are trying to prevent, like Tantalus starving, despite food being at arm’s-length, until he reaches for it, and dehydrating, despite water lapping his chin, until he sticks his tongue out, or like Sisyphus forever failing to get a boulder up a hill⁴⁶; (4) *aggravate* what they are trying to prevent, like they are trapped in a spider’s web, and in trying to wriggle out, attract the attention of the spider and entangle themselves further; (5) *become* what they are trying to prevent, like Moses in the desert; (6) *revise* what it is they are trying to prevent, like Jesus’s swimming instructor; or (7) *succeed* partially in what they set out to do and *regret* it, as Wilde said, “In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it. The last is much the worst; the last is a real tragedy!”⁴⁷ Of course, there are also reforms that don’t catch on at all. This is no reason to believe they are any less fanciful, although they may be fanciful for other reasons.

2. Value is Subjective

The second delusion is the belief that what one person values, everyone else does equally. As Mencken said, most men “cannot formulate the concept of a good that is not his own good. The fact explains his immemorial heat against heretics, sacred and secular.”⁴⁸

Mencken acknowledged that value is subjective. He could see that many supporters of government do not prefer to support a libertarian society. In this way he goes further than most libertarians, who

44 Quoted in Lin Yutang’s *The Importance of Living* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1937), p. 243.

45 François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. Burton Raffel (New York: Norton, 1991), pp. 242-44, bk. 3, author’s prologue.

46 Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1997), pp. 268-69, bk. 11, lns. 679-89.

47 Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Act III.

48 *Notes on Democracy*, p. 31.

fail to apply their rule of subjective utility to individuals living in a society where government is already established. The consent of these individuals to government is not evident, it is true, but often no expression of discontent, despite many safe opportunities, can be found. So although it cannot be proven that they consent, neither can it be proven that they disapprove and suffer. For more on this, see Benjamin Marks, "Grounding Political Debate," *Libertarian Papers* 1, 18 (2009). Many people fail to acknowledge the subjectivity of value, and many people fail to acknowledge this. Mencken did not fail on either account. As a result, he neither believed that statist reform would be beneficial, nor that libertarian reform would be adopted.

In the following sections, among other things, additional reasons, clarifications and qualifications for disbelieving in "solutions" are given.

VI. Mencken Critical, Not Nihilistic

A doctor might say that someone is fat, incurably sick or brain-dead; but this, of itself, neither means the doctor is a nihilist, nor that he is incompetent to discuss what he can't cure. As Mencken said:

My business is not prognosis, but diagnosis. I am not engaged in therapeutics, but in pathology. That simple statement of fact, I daresay, will be accepted as a confession, condemning me out of hand as unfit for my task, and even throwing a certain doubt upon my *bona fides*. For it is one of the peculiar intellectual accompaniments of democracy that the concept of the insoluble becomes unfashionable — nay, almost infamous. To lack a remedy is to lack the very license to discuss disease. The causes of this are to be sought, without question, in the nature of democracy itself. It came into the world as a cure-all, and it remains primarily a cure-all to this day. Any boil upon the body politic, however vast and raging, may be relieved by taking a vote; any flux of blood may be stopped by passing a law. The aim of government is to repeal the laws of nature, and re-enact them with moral amendments. War becomes simply a device to end war. The state, a mystical emanation from the mob, takes on a transcendental potency, and acquires the power to make over the father which begat it.⁴⁹

And:

Here, precisely, is what is the matter with most of the notions that go floating about the country, particularly in the field of governmental reform. The trouble with them is not only that they won't and don't work; the trouble with them, more importantly, is that the thing they propose to accomplish is intrinsically, or at all events most probably, beyond accomplishment. That is to say, the problem they are ostensibly designed to solve is a problem that is insoluble. To tackle them with a proof of that insolubility, or even with a colorable argument of it, is sound criticism; to tackle them with another solution that is quite as bad, or even worse, is to pick the pocket of one knocked down by an automobile.⁵⁰

Equally, it is unlikely that "the great majority of human beings" — that is, "the optimists and chronic hoppers of the world, the believers in men, ideas and things" — that is, "the advocates of leagues of nations, wars to make the world safe for democracy, political mountebanks, 'clean-up' campaigns, laws, raids, Men and Religion Forward Movements, eugenics, sex hygiene, education,

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 195-96.

⁵⁰ H.L. Mencken, *Prejudices: Second Series* (New York: Octagon Books, 1985), p. 212.

newspapers”⁵¹ — can actually be shown the error of their ways.⁵² As Mencken said:

What is to be done for [the man full of faith, the forward-looker]? How is he to be cured of his great thirst for sure-cures that do not cure, and converted into a contented and careless backward-looker, peacefully snoozing beneath his fig tree while the oppressed bawl for succor in forty abandoned lands, and injustice stalks the world, and taxes mount higher and higher, and poor working-girls are sold into white slavery, and Prohibition fails to prohibit, and cocaine is hawked openly, and jazz drags millions down the primrose way, and the trusts own the legislatures of all Christendom, and judges go to dinner with millionaires, and Europe prepares for another war, and children of four and five years work as stevedores and locomotive firemen, and guinea pigs and dogs are vivisected, and Polish immigrant women have more children every year, and divorces multiply, and materialism rages, and the devil runs the cosmos? What is to be done to save the forward-looker from his torturing indignations, and set him in paths of happy dalliance? Answer: nothing. He was born that way, as men are born with hare lips or bad livers, and he will remain that way until the angels summon him to eternal rest. Destiny has laid upon him the burden of seeing unescapably what had better not be looked at, of believing what isn’t so. There is no way to help him. He must suffer vicariously for the carnal ease of the rest of us. He must die daily that we may live in peace, corrupt and contented[.]⁵³

Why do people like Mencken believe this?

Is it because they are afraid? Is it because they are not intrigued by it? ... The real reason ... is this: that none of them — that no genuinely thoughtful and prudent man — can imagine any solution which meets the tests of his own criticism — that no genuinely intelligent man believes the thing is soluble at all.⁵⁴

It follows:

A man full of faith is simply one who has lost (or never had) the capacity for clear and realistic thought. He is not a mere ass: he is actually ill. Worse, he is incurable, for disappointment, being essentially an objective phenomenon, cannot permanently affect his

51 *Ibid.*, p. 213.

52 As George Bernard Shaw said, “There is no harder scientific fact in the world than the fact that belief can be produced in practically unlimited quantity and intensity, without observation or reasoning, and even in defiance of both, by the simple desire to believe founded on a strong interest in believing.” Bernard Shaw, *The Doctor's Dilemma* (London: Constable and Company, 1922), p. xxiv.

53 *Prejudices: Third Series*, pp. 225-26. A similar passage is in James Fitzjames Stephen, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, ed. Stuart D. Warner (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1993), pp. 155-56: “If I am asked, What do you propose to substitute for universal suffrage? Practically, What have you to recommend? I answer at once, Nothing. The whole current of thought and feeling, the whole stream of human affairs, is setting with irresistible force in that direction ... The waters are out and no human force can turn them back, but I do not see why as we go with the stream we need sing Hallelujah to the river god.” Another similar passage, especially to the Stephen one, is in Albert Jay Nock, *Our Enemy, the State* (Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, 1946), p. 203: “Taking the sum of the State’s physical strength, with the force of powerful spiritual influences behind it, one asks ... what can be done against the State’s progress in self-aggrandizement? Simply nothing. So far from encouraging any hopeful contemplation of the unattainable, the student of civilized man will offer no conclusion but that nothing can be done. He can regard the course of our civilization only as he would regard the course of a man in a row-boat on the lower reaches of the Niagara — as an instance of Nature’s unconquerable intolerance of disorder, and in the end, an example of the penalty which she puts upon any attempt at interference with order.” This river is shaped by government banks and government levies, and the tide of opinion that fills it drowns out dissent. As a result, we are ruled by current affairs. The best the libertarian can do is damn it. There is no watertight way to water it down. We might not be able to call a stop to government, but at least we can to analogies and puns. Or can we? Is not government just a metaphorical application of the language of justice and progress to crime and demagoguery?

54 *Prejudices: Second Series*, p. 215.

subjective infirmity. His faith takes on the virulence of a chronic infection.⁵⁵

Mencken believed that, although people are far from perfect, they are unimprovable, or at least unable to be predictably and intentionally improved. When they become convinced that one of their beliefs are erroneous, they just go out and find another. In the previous section we saw Mecken say exactly that.

This conservatism requires much more discipline than resorting to psychoanalysis, utilitarian economics, social studies, theology, or any of the other popular and apparently complex so-called disciplines. That problems are soluble; that solutions are knowable; that solutions are likely to be adopted; that ignorance does have causes, i.e., that there is reason behind ignorance; that stupidity does have cures, i.e., that education is possible; that evil is punished and good rewarded: for many people, as Mencken said, it is “easier to imagine it than not to imagine it.”⁵⁶ Mencken also said, “Truth would quickly cease to be stranger than fiction, once we got as used to it.”⁵⁷

Conservatism is simple and calmly pessimistic, so it bores most people, is rarely held unfalteringly, and does not receive any funding or attention — that is, as a purely political or scientific pursuit. Conservatives/libertarians believe they are smarter than most romantics/interventionists, because they are the ones who are right. But how is this compatible with the fact that they have failed to communicate their case as well as romantics/interventionists? Is truth that big a disadvantage to successful activism? Who has been outsmarted now; can the smart be outsmarted by the stupid? One can endlessly quibble about strategy and list areas for improvement, but to a conservative it is obvious that far from being outsmarted, conservatives/libertarians have been outstupided. As Mencken said, “it seems to me to be nonsensical for a man to offer generally some commodity that only a few rare and dubious Americans want, and then weep and beat his breast because he is not patronized.”⁵⁸ Purely to raise money, Mencken co-founded three highly profitable magazines *Saucy Stories*, *Parisienne* and *Black Mask* (which apparently was the original title for the 1994 film *Pulp Fiction*), and wanted to start another that was to be called *Pretty Girls*.⁵⁹

Conservatives have such accurate understanding and subsequent low — or, rather, appropriate — expectations that they cannot apply the term failure to themselves or their surroundings. On this definition, conservatism escapes the label of pessimism, or becomes only an incidental pessimism. Pessimism is a very confused term — if it were struck from the world’s vocabulary, I would be quite optimistic about the results. Pessimism is as confusing a concept as the claim that Mencken was one of the great hopes of the conservative movement. It has a certain attraction, due to its common usage, but on reflection it is either meaningless or misleading.

Mencken further addressed the confusing of negative fact with negative philosophy when describing the proposals of conservatives like Mencken himself:

His remedy, in brief, is to abandon all attempts at a solution, to let the whole thing go, to cork up all the reformers and try to forget it ... He admits that the disease is bad, but he shows that the medicine is infinitely worse, and so he proposes going back to the plain disease, and advocates bearing it with philosophy, as we bear colds in the head, marriage,

⁵⁵ *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 11.

⁵⁶ *Treatise on the Gods*, p. 15; see also, for example, pp. 13, 42-43, 328-33.

⁵⁷ H.L. Mencken, *A Little Book In C Major* (New York: John Lane, 1916), p. 34. Similarly, it reads in G.K. Chesterton's *Heretics*, ch. IV, in vol. I of *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p. 66: “Truth, of course, must of necessity be stranger than fiction, for we have made fiction to suit ourselves.” See also G.K. Chesterton, *The Club of Queer Trades*, ch. IV, in vol. VI of *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), p. 133.

⁵⁸ *Prejudices: Third Series*, p. 15.

⁵⁹ H.L. Mencken, *My Life as Author and Editor*, ed. Jonathan Yardley (New York: Knopf, 1993), pp. 86, 350-53.

the noises of the city, bad cooking and the certainty of death ... Such men are never popular. The public taste is for merchandise of a precisely opposite character. The way to please is to proclaim in a confident manner, not what is true, but what is merely comforting. This is what is called building up. This is constructive criticism.⁶⁰

And:

Of a piece with the absurd pedagogical demand for so-called constructive criticism is the doctrine that an iconoclast is a hollow and evil fellow unless he can prove his case. Why, indeed, should he prove it? Doesn't he prove enough when he proves by his blasphemy that this or that idol is defectively convincing — that at least *one* visitor to the shrine is left full of doubts?⁶¹

Mencken never built anything teetering on the edge or precariously in the clouds. He tried to set firm foundations and do things in the proper order. But no matter how much muckraking he did, he never progressed past the plumbing. Meanwhile, other commentators were addressing the décor of their dreams, explaining the silver lining of their clouds, and building flimsy walls on which to display their accomplishments — it's as if they used newspapers for shelter. Mencken would give them his two cents, and enjoy their gutter-sniping.

VII. Mencken Critical, Not Depressed, Even If Pessimistic

We have seen that a negative message is not a negative *philosophy*. Now we shall see that a negative message is not a negative *personality*.

Much misunderstanding of Mencken is due to the common belief that pessimism and cynicism are personality traits rather than, and instead of, results of reason. Mencken committed contributory negligence to his legacy by occasionally misrepresenting the cynical point of view with improbably pessimistic statements.⁶² But the pessimism he believed in was actually founded on probabilities of the most justified and reasonable kind.⁶³

Instead of going through the reasons for his pessimism and cynicism, we will see that pessimism and cynicism can be enjoyably held, which is the crux of the misunderstanding, as it is a barrier to even considering his historical knowledge and libertarianism.

Just as many people consider ignorance to be exciting, immaturity to be cute, senility to be wise, stupidity to be heroic, people lacking sense of humour to be funny, error to be educational,

60 *Prejudices: Second Series*, pp. 216-18.

61 *Prejudices: Fourth Series*, p. 139.

62 One such oft-quoted remark is, "A cynic is a man who, when he smells flowers, looks around for the coffin." Although this is always credited to Mencken, and I can perfectly believe that he was the author, I have never actually seen Mencken himself claim that it was his. It is in *The Smart Set*, vol. LXX, no. 4 (April, 1923), p. 130. It is one of the many anonymous epigrams scattered on page-footers throughout the magazine. Mencken edited and contributed to the magazine, and was author of some of the anonymous epigrams, but not all of them. Usually, what Mencken wrote anonymously or as part of a co-authored article, he later would republish under his own name. I find no evidence of this here. It is possible I just missed it.

63 That he called six volumes of his writings *Prejudices* is not another example of his contributory negligence, or is only a mild one. It is very shocking to see the positive use of a word used mostly negatively; it leads people to question their own prejudices. Calling the books *Prejudices* tells readers that it will not be a dull read, and deters critics from complaining of its lack of "academic" tone, since it is obviously not meant to have one. It is an advertisement and a defence against critics. That it may have some negative consequences should not be blamed on Mencken. Once you read his *Prejudices*, they are no longer merely prejudices. They are also well-reasoned. Those who fail to appreciate this have not read the contents sincerely.

aimlessness to be freedom, physical discomfort to be exercise, boring commonplace occurrences to be comforting and crime to be newsworthy, so Mencken found some good in what is commonly considered bad: he scoffed fools gladly. Here are some proofs:

The fraud of democracy, I contend, is more amusing than any other ... All its axioms resolve themselves into thundering paradoxes, many amounting to downright contradictions in terms. The mob is competent to rule the rest of us — but it must be rigorously policed itself. There is a government, not of men, but of laws — but men are set upon benches to decide finally what the law is and may be ... What grotesque false pretenses! What a parade of obvious imbecilities! What a welter of fraud! ... Go into your praying-chamber and give sober thought to any of the more typical democratic inventions. Or to any of the typical democratic prophets. If you don't come out paled and palsied by mirth then you will not laugh on the Last Day itself, when Presbyterians step out of the grave like chicks from the egg, and wings blossom from their scapulae, and they leap into interstellar space with roars of joy ... I confess, for my part, that it greatly delights me. I enjoy democracy immensely. It is incomparably idiotic, and hence incomparably amusing ... the spectacle is infinitely exhilarating ... I am ... a somewhat malicious man: my sympathies, when it comes to suckers, tend to be coy.⁶⁴

And:

Has the art and mystery of politics no apparent utility? Does it appear to be unqualifiedly ratty, raffish, sordid, obscene and low down, and its salient virtuosi a gang of unmitigated scoundrels? Then let us not forget its high capacity to soothe and tickle the midriff, its incomparable services as a maker of entertainment.⁶⁵

Mencken was once asked, "If you find so much that is unworthy of reverence in the United States, then why do you live here?" He responded, "Why do men go to zoos?"⁶⁶ Elsewhere, he elaborated:

Life in America interests me, not as a moral phenomenon, but simply as a gaudy spectacle. I enjoy it most when it is most uproarious, preposterous, inordinate and melodramatic. I am perfectly willing to give a Roosevelt, a Wilson, a Fall, an Elder Hays, an Andy Mellon or a Tom Heflin such small part of my revenues as he can gouge out of me in return for the show that he offers. Such gorgeous mountebanks take my mind off my gallstones, my war wounds, my public duties and my unfortunate love affairs, and so make existence agreeable.⁶⁷

And:

[T]here is no [other] country on the face of the earth wherein a man roughly constituted as I

⁶⁴ *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, pp. 167-68.

⁶⁵ *On Politics*, p. 153; see also pp. 83-84.

⁶⁶ *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 627; cf. pp. 365-67, p. 17 and pp. 4-8, and *On Religion*, pp. 225-28. Three other good and perhaps more strategic answers to the same question are: (1) if you detest my presence here so much, it is my right to stay and your right to leave; (2) the domestic policy of the country is preferable to its foreign policy; and (3) if you dislike being the recipient of my criticism, you can always heed it and join in — either way it is a sign of my criticism at least partly getting through, in sentiment or reason, and if you don't like it, why encourage me? Those responses, of course, avoid addressing the two more academic implications of the question, for which these statements should be expanded: (1) government has no just claim to the ownership of its claimed territory; and (2) acquiescence is not consent. For one final comment, suppose I break into your home, start stealing your stuff, then when you confront me I say, "If you don't like it, you can always leave." How does saying that show any principled political philosophy?

⁶⁷ *On Politics*, p. 160.

am — a man of my general weaknesses, vanities, appetites, prejudices, and aversions — can be so happy, or even one-half so happy ... it is a sheer physical impossibility for such a man to live in These States and *not* be happy — ... it is as impossible to him as it would be to a schoolboy to weep over the burning down of his school-house ... And here, more than anywhere else that I know of or have heard of, the daily panorama of human existence, of private and communal folly — the unending procession of governmental extortions and chicaneries, of commercial brigandages and throat-slittings, of theological buffooneries, of aesthetic ribaldries, of legal swindles and harlotries, of miscellaneous rogueries, villanies, imbecilities, grotesqueries, and extravagances — is so inordinately gross and preposterous, so perfectly brought up to the highest conceivable amperage, so steadily enriched with an almost famous daring and originality, that only the man who was born with a petrified diaphragm can fail to laugh himself to sleep every night, and to awake every morning with all the eager, unflagging expectation of a Sunday-school superintendent touring the Paris peep-shows ...

[T]his glorious commonwealth of morons ... is incomparably the greatest show on earth ... What could be more delightful than the endless struggle of the Puritan to make the joy of the minority unlawful and impossible? The effort itself is a greater joy to one standing on the side-lines than any or all of the carnal joys that it combats ... I never get tired of the show. It is worth every cent it costs.

That cost, it seems to me is very moderate. Taxes in the United States are not actually high. I figure, for example, that my private share of the expense of maintaining the Hon. Mr. Harding in the White House this year will work out to less than 80 cents. Try to think of better sport for the money: in New York it has been estimated that it costs \$8 to get comfortably tight, and \$17.50, on an average, to pinch a girl's arm. The United States Senate will cost me perhaps \$11 for the year, but against that expense set the subscription price of the *Congressional Record*, about \$15, which, as a journalist, I receive for nothing. For \$4 less than nothing I am thus entertained as Solomon never was by his hooch dancers.⁶⁸

The happiness of Mencken was not taxed by government; it was subsidised. If government did not exist, you could not voluntarily pay money to create it, even if you had millions to spare; for if you were not forced to pay for it, then the presumptuousness and arrogance that makes government so amusing would disappear. It would be water off a duck's back rather than a tickling of the ribs. For a conservative, government cannot be bought.

Although Mencken did not respect government, he had plenty of time for it. Government might not always be pleasant, but it is, for lack of a better word, captivating. Prison, for example, is just a place where selected criminals and innocents are given free — worse: coercively sponsored — shelter, food, clothing and leisure-time; it is a holiday from responsibility, a resort for those who resort to crime. Who can blame people for fighting to get in, and the subsequent high security to prevent overcrowding?

During Prohibition, Mencken swallowed his pride and gulped in amazement, doing what he could to decrease the availability of alcohol. His support of government is more than happy indifference; it is provocative heckling. He is sincere, but he is not aiming to support government — at least not any more than laughing and enjoying the badness of a film is a sign of supporting the film. It is supportive of the film, but it is also a sincere cajoling criticism. Mencken's support of government would be considered insulting by almost all government members and supporters. His appreciation of government was not out of respect for his enemy, but out of *schadenfreude*. Government was

68 *Prejudices: Third Series*, pp. 12-14, 18, 58, 62-63.

more an amusement than an enemy. But, nonetheless, government was still an enemy. He did not laugh with it; he laughed at it. He patronised government.

Mencken was neither indignant nor apathetic. He thought government pathetic, obscene and criminal; but not hideous, intolerable or unsightly. He did not believe in government; but he was enchanted by it. To him society did not consist of sinners to be scalded, psyches to be searched, citizens to be subjected, soldiers to be sent, situations to be solved, or souls to be saved; but of sordidness to be savoured. He considered politics a genre of entertainment rather than a safeguard or sector of society. He treated the corruption of politics merely as ad breaks. He saw people falling over themselves to benefit from a fallen world, and, like a good student of slapstick, found falling funny. Civilisation going to the dogs, for him, was like going to the greyhound races. He treated the copious paperwork and red tape of bureaucracy like they were part of a ticker-tape parade — like their wounds could be unwound. He hated many things, but loved to hate them; it was a hobby, not a duty. He suffered from neither optimism nor pessimism, even if he was pessimistic.

VIII. Mencken's Utopia

We have seen that Mencken found government very amusing. He also thought it was good, in certain situations, for discipline and education, which led him to propose, “all authors should be benefited by [imprisonment], and ... all other men who devote themselves to telling humanity what [life] is all about.”⁶⁹ He gives an example in support, “In manner and aspect Cosima [Richard Wagner’s second wife] was far nearer a police sergeant than a sweetie, and life with her must have been comparable to going through an earthquake every day, or fleeing endlessly from a posse of lynchers, but the effect upon Wagner was superb.”⁷⁰

Mencken’s satisfaction with the current state of affairs makes us ask: would he have preferred a libertarian society? But the question is misleading on four levels.

Firstly, decisions are always made at the margin, so the question creates an artificial situation. The question itself, not just the object of its inquiry, is utopian; it is a wholesale error. As Mencken said:

Do I limn utopia? Well, why not? Utopia, like virtue, is a concept shot through with relativity. To men in jail, I daresay, the radio is a boon.⁷¹

Secondly, what one finds enjoyable need not be lawful (I do not mean lawful in the legislative sense). A spectator may enjoy something he would never participate in — a libertarian society may be endorsed over all others, without being preferred. We have repeatedly seen Mencken hold this position. For another example, in contrast to the widespread indignant condemnation of war, especially among libertarians, he was against war on many grounds, but never indignantly. In fact, he said, “War naturally sucks in those who can be most profitably spared,” and calculated that based on what the war veterans went on to achieve, “the Civil War cost American *Kultur* exactly three-fourths of a really valuable man.”⁷² Atypical fare from an antiwar activist. His description of Bierce’s attitude to war is also autobiographical:

What he got out of [war] was not a sentimental horror of it, but a cynical delight in it. It appeared to him as a sort of magnificent *reductio ad absurdum* of all romance. The world viewed war as something heroic, glorious, idealistic. Very well, he would show how sordid

⁶⁹ *A Second Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 341.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 342; cf. *Prejudices: Second Series*, p. 241; and *Prejudices: Fourth Series*, pp. 248-52 and also p. 278.

⁷¹ *A Second Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 195.

⁷² *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, pp. 216-18; cf. *Prejudices: Fourth Series*, p. 278.

and filthy it was — how stupid, savage and degrading. But to say this is not to say he disapproved it. On the contrary, he greatly enjoyed the chance its discussion gave him to set forth dramatically what he was always talking about and gloating over: the infinite imbecility of man ... What delighted him most in life was the spectacle of human cowardice and folly ... Man to him, was the most stupid and ignoble of animals. But at the same time the most amusing. Out of the spectacle of life about him he got an unflagging and Gargantuan joy. The obscene farce of politics delighted him. He was an almost amorous connoisseur of theology and theologians. He howled with mirth whenever he thought of a professor, a doctor or a husband.⁷³

Mencken believed both war and antiwar activism to be futile; that giving people an avocation, vocation, vacation, voice, vote or violence are all just as unlikely to succeed. This outlook is applicable to all other reforms, from rubbish recycling to water restrictions to road rage.

Thirdly, as background for this point, Mencken defined democracy as:

The theory that two thieves will steal less than one, and three less than two, and four less than three, and so on *ad infinitum*; the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard.⁷⁴

Given this definition, Mencken, in simply stating a case and not righteously demanding agreement, was being doubly libertarian by allowing people to make their own mistakes. This may even be a superior way to communicate the truth: not by stating it, but by outrageously and impotently championing the opposite, arguing that he appreciates laughing at the stupidity of others, as in his comment on war in the previous paragraph. He straightened out the crooks of his time, turning them into excellent straight men for him to bounce off. So although he personally delights in the current state of affairs, if people take his comments to heart, they would not remain orthodox supporters of government. For another example:

As democracy is perfected, the office represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. We move towards a lofty ideal. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last, and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron.⁷⁵

Mencken fawned over government supporters with all sincerity, but this, if listened to, would not make them feel more secure; it would make them blush. He accepted people who did not question, listened to people who could not hear, learnt from the ignorant, and wrote about illiterates, all with sincere amusement. He stuck it to those he was stuck with; he was their adherent. He submitted all he could to them.

Fourthly, Mencken did not believe the libertarian revolution would happen in his lifetime, or that he could possibly contribute towards it. He was not a utopian, so it is fruitless asking what his utopia was. Or, rather, he was living in his utopia, as his praise for the America of his time, which we have already read, is absolute. Here is another example:

All I ask of “good” Americans is that they continue to serve me hereafter, as in the past, as

73 *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, pp. 493-94. For a film version of Bierce at war, see the first 45 minutes of *Old Gringo* (1989). Critics complain that the battle scenes go on too long and never seem to get anywhere. They don't realise that that is precisely the point. Most other criticisms of the film are deserved. If Bierce had died 45 minutes into *Old Gringo*, then it would have been a great film.

74 H.L. Mencken, *A Book of Burlesques* (New York: Knopf, 1920). p. 203.

75 *On Politics*, p. 21.

willing laboratory animals. In that role they have great talents. No other country has so many gorgeous frauds and imbeciles as the United States, and in consequence no other country is so amusing. Thus my patriotism is impeccable, though perhaps not orthodox. I love my country as a small boy loves the circus.⁷⁶

Mencken once hypothesised, “If I had it in my power to put down Prohibition overnight, or to scotch the Fundamentalists, or to hang all Men of Vision, I’d not have to flee from the temptation, for there would be no temptation.”⁷⁷ But, surely, if he had the option, then there would be far less arrogance and tyranny to ridicule. Therefore, it is either a jest written to express his joy witnessing something he cannot prevent, or a comment made without consideration, the sincerity of which is unproven by demonstrated preference and so remains unconsummated. Mencken’s love of America was unrequited; it was not considered love in the eyes of America. In any case, he thought fighting for the libertarian cause could be much fun. An example:

[T]hink of the noble divertissement that John D. Rockefeller could have got by giving \$100,000,000 to the Mormons, first to finance a nation-wide campaign in favour of polygamy, then to buy legislation authorizing it from the State Legislatures, and then to pay for a fight to a finish before the Supreme Court of the United States, with all the leading barristers of the nation for defense. The combat would have been gaudy, thrilling, incomparable.⁷⁸

Incidentally, this snippet shows us that writing about these things and imagining them can be more amusing, convenient and productive than actually going ahead and doing them. And also, in the sense that Ambrose Bierce defines a novel as, “A short story padded,” so writing about and imagining long drawn out court battles, is a more concise way of communicating what they would entail than going ahead and doing them.

Mencken’s attitude to libertarianism is best summed up when he says:

I do not share [Jefferson’s] belief in the wisdom and rectitude of the common man, but I go with him in his belief that the very commonest of common men has certain inalienable rights ... [P]eople mistake my belief for liberty for a belief in the persons whose liberty is menaced ... I am against slavery simply because I dislike slaves.⁷⁹

These quotes beautifully represent Mencken’s philosophy and spirit. However, they still leave unexplained exactly how he can enjoy so greatly what he detests so much. Is it then true that he does not really detest it? Can there be a happy pessimism? Yes. In fact, in some ways, Mencken’s pessimism makes happiness easier. This is addressed in the next section.

IX. The Positives of Pessimism

If you do not expect anything better, then: (1) you appreciate what you already have more; (2) you are not going to waste time and effort developing and implementing reforms that will fail, disadvantage and disappoint; (3) lacking potential for disappointment, and seeing that you cannot do much about your mortality, you will not worry about it so much, making you feel almost immortal; (4) you will be more realistic, and therefore, at least sometimes, more successful; and (5)

⁷⁶ *The Gist of Mencken*, p. 28.

⁷⁷ *The Impossible H.L. Mencken*, p. 682.

⁷⁸ *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 383.

⁷⁹ H.L. Mencken, “The Library,” *The American Mercury*, vol. XII, no. 45 (September 1927), p. 124; *The Gist of Mencken*, p. 467; and *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 616.

you will be as happy as a lottery winner when you do witness some improvement. Also, (6) for those without hope, pessimism offers, not hope, but reassurance — those who value truth, accuracy and realism, will be rewarded by being right — that is, those who think being right is its own reward, will be rewarded by being right.

So perhaps we should all look at optimism a little less optimistically. I would then be more optimistic about its proximity to reality.

Of course, one should be careful not to expect too much from pessimism. It does, possibly, have disadvantages, but almost none that a fake smile, careful choice of words and a few lies can't elude. If you want to, you can still “fit in” — that is, read newspapers, donate gifts that won't be used, value or foster a good work ethic, fund a think tank or university that won't listen to you, yell at a driver who doesn't speak your language, lodge a vote that won't make a difference, change channels, attend church, and take your kids to school. Pessimism can help you fit in, for mistakes and misunderstandings will not compromise relationships.

A pessimist is never frustrated, or at least sees that it is futile to express his frustration. He would consider the common resort of frustrated optimists, of voting for one party out of frustration with the other, to be as useful as bashing one's head against a wall, breaking crockery or screaming.

Pessimism is not the opposite of optimism. It is a different attitude to hope. Optimism is mostly fuelled by hope. Pessimism is not. But pessimism can co-exist with hope; one can be hopeful yet pessimistic. Believing that something is likely is different to consenting, supporting, wanting, intending or causing it. Just because something is expected, it does not make it welcome. Just because something is greeted, it does not mean it is liked – for example, most civilian murderers are well-acquainted with their victims.

As an author, Mencken's pessimism found a doubly relevant outlet, as he explained:

The world, to such a man, never grows downright unbearable. There is always a sheet of paper. There is always a pen.⁸⁰

Being an author was not the only reason that Mencken could be pessimistic and happy. But being an author, or of reflective mind, does mean that one's own experiences can be observed from the perspective of a spectator. When a combatant is also a spectator a good show is much easier to come across. It is political pantomime and the height of heckling.

That Mencken's happiness was aided by his pessimism is evident from many of the passages quoted above. Here are some more examples:

Reconciling ourselves to the incurable swinishness of government, and to the inevitable stupidity and roguery of its agents, we discover that both stupidity and roguery are bearable — nay, that there is in them a certain assurance against something worse.⁸¹

Moreover:

Most of the sorrows of man, I incline to think, are caused by ... repining. Alone among the animals, he is dowered with the capacity to invent imaginary worlds, and he is always making himself unhappy by trying to move into them. Thus he underrates the world in

⁸⁰ *Minority Report*, p. 20.

⁸¹ *On Religion*, p. 39.

which he actually lives, and so misses most of the fun that is in it.⁸²

And:

Despite the common delusion to the contrary the philosophy of doubt is far more comforting than that of hope. The doubter escapes the worst penalty of the man of faith and hope; he is never disappointed, and hence never indignant. The inexplicable and irremediable may interest him, but they do not enrage him, or, I may add, fool him. This immunity is worth all the dubious assurances ever foisted upon man. It is pragmatically impregnable. Moreover, it makes for tolerance and sympathy. The doubter does not hate his opponents; he sympathizes with them. In the end he may even come to sympathize with God. The old idea of fatherhood here submerges in a new idea of brotherhood. God, too, is beset by limitations, difficulties, broken hopes. Is it disconcerting to think of him thus? Well, is it any less disconcerting to think of him as able to ease and answer, and yet failing?⁸³

Also:

One of the most curious of human delusions lies in the theory that cynics are unhappy men — that cynicism makes for a general biliousness and malaise. It is a false deduction, I believe, from the obvious fact that cynics make *other* men unhappy.⁸⁴ But they are themselves among the most comfortable and serene of mammals ... For what a cynic believes, though it may be too dreadful to be put into formal words, at least usually has the merit of being true — and truth is ever a rock, hard and harsh, but solid under the feet. A cynic is chronically in the position of a wedding guest who has known the bride for nine years, and has had her confidence. He is a great deal less happy, theoretically, than the bridegroom. The bridegroom, beautifully barbered and arrayed, is about to launch into the honeymoon. But the cynic looks ahead two weeks, two months, two years. Such, to borrow a phrase from the late Dr. Eliot, are the durable satisfactions of life.⁸⁵

In the same way, Mencken is one of the durable satisfactions of life; as we have seen, he is still fresh, fierce, fun and instructive. After all, he is a conservative. His writing is fulfilling; it is the writing of uplifters that leaves much to be desired.

X. Conservatism is Timeless

Mencken had only a passing interest in current affairs. It was the underlying currents that he focussed on. Nothing that he described has changed. His opinions were neither ahead of nor behind the times. His interpretations were right and his expectations met, and they continue to be.

The publication of Mencken's diary in 1989, 33 years after his death, got a controversial reception. The diary does have dated views, but in a far simpler sense than critics claim. What critics struggle to comprehend is that he is just as controversial now (or in 1989) as he has ever been. After all, principles don't age, only people do, and, as the patriots say, we have a government of laws, not

82 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

83 *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 89. On sympathizing or pitying God, see also H.L. Mencken, *A Book of Prefaces* (New York: Knopf, 1920), p. 17 — much of the essay on Conrad is also applicable to Mencken.

84 A similar issue is that when those who are not cynical are upset by the lack of interest a cynic shows them and their interests, they falsely deduce that they are always like that. See, for example, George Jean Nathan, *The Bachelor Life* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1941), pp. 28-32.

85 H.L. Mencken, *Prejudices: Fifth Series* (New York: Octagon Books, 1985), pp. 292-93; cf. *A Little Book In C Major*, p. 10: "The lucky man is one who is not even invited to the wedding."

mere people.

XI. Expectations Differ to Hopes

Simultaneously, expectations can be met and hopes disappointed. Expectations are often confused with hopes. Many people believe that positive thinking — that is, having high expectations, not merely high hopes — is necessary to have hopes realised. There is nothing necessary about it, and it often has the opposite of the desired effect.

When expectations are not met, it is due to poor reasoning. Whereas when both expectations and hopes are not realised, then it is merely due to lack of effort and time or size of obstacles. It means that one's interpretation of the world is not brought into question, only what they should do in it. Hopes can be shaped by expectations, but neither need replace the other.

XII. Mencken's Cynicism

Was Mencken's conservatism caused by the incidence and severity of the quacks, shysters and demagogues of his time, or was it just a coincidence? If there was no believing and espousing of untruths, would he have advocated and invented them? Did his libertarianism come before his conservatism or *vice versa*? It is to such questions that Mencken said:

How are we to account for it? My question, of course, is purely rhetorical. Explanations exist; they have existed for all times, for there is always an easy solution to every human problem — neat, plausible, and wrong.⁸⁶

So here's a messy, slightly fanciful and more descriptive than explanatory attempt:

Mencken's criticism was not due solely to his cynicism, but to a changing symbiosis or mishmash of alertness (actually seeing things), bravery (saying unpopular things), honesty (choosing to say his own beliefs), humour, aesthetic taste, knowledge (having theories, facts and vocabulary to draw from), intelligence (interpreting history and his surroundings correctly), luck (with infinite variables coming together, including many not mentioned in this list, and talent alone insufficient), generosity (sharing his skills), and malice (sharing his views with people who didn't want to hear it and would be humiliated by others hearing it). It was brought on, reinforced, or shaped by: what he witnessed, read,⁸⁷ and learnt from his father.⁸⁸ Or, as he put it, “laborious research ... long experience, profound pondering and incessant prayer.”⁸⁹

Mencken's cynicism was largely a secondary thing: a reaction to the world more than a way of looking at it. His cynicism is not contrariness except in result; it is the result of reasoning inductively — assuming that what has happened in the past, will happen in the future — and

⁸⁶ *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 443.

⁸⁷ For example, *Letters of H.L. Mencken*, p. 337: “The books of your old chief, Dr. Sumner, made a powerful impression on me when I was young, and their influence has survived. I only wish that such things as ‘The Forgotten Man’ could be printed as circulars in editions of millions.”

⁸⁸ On the influence of Mencken's father, see H.L. Mencken, *Happy Days* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 188, 251-52: e.g., “I [Mencken] picked up the idea [‘that reform was mainly only a conspiracy of prehensile charlatans to mulct taxpayers’] from him [Mencken senior] ... He [Mencken senior] believed that political corruption was inevitable under democracy, and even argued, out of his own experience, that it had its uses.”

⁸⁹ *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 575; and H.L. Mencken, *Mencken's Last Campaign*, ed. Joseph C. Goulden (Washington, D.C.: The New Republic Book Company, 1978), p. 112.

deductively — finding what an espoused position entails. He may have been arrogant, cruel and pessimistic, but he was also right. He was both idealist and realist, and, since they were both accurate and therefore mutually supporting, never compromised either position. He did not lack faith; he lacked deserving locations for it. He believed that death was very popular, seeing that few people ever returned from it.

Mencken was not shallow, cheap or dismissive. He made fun of things because he took them more seriously than their most avid supporters. He was able to make light of things, because he was not in the dark about them. His criticisms were not shots in the dark. He took frauds like government so seriously that, rather than accept the jests of its defenders, he worked out where its policies and principles led. Many self-professed and so-called emulators of Mencken fail to realise this. Sometimes they get close, but no cigar. They stand for nothing and sneer or joke about everything, which is different to Mencken and often less forceful. Instead of being incisive and provocative, they attract attention to, distract from or trivialise the issue. This is not necessarily a bad thing, and it may even be fierce. But without Mencken's principled approach (a conservative libertarianism), those hoping to emulate him will find their work lacks his consistent fierceness — as Mencken said, “Injustice is relatively easy to bear; what stings is justice.”⁹⁰ Also, because facts date whereas principles are timeless, their humour and force rarely lasts long. As Mencken said, they are:

engaged endlessly upon a laborious and furious discussion of transient futilities ... wholly unconscious of the underlying political currents ... [T]he puerile combats of parties and candidates [are] scarcely ... distinguished from a mere combat for jobs ... What is printed in the newspapers ... acres and acres of it every day, is dead the day after it is printed.⁹¹

It was because Mencken could see so clearly what was happening that he was amused by it. It was not because he was easily amused, had a fertile imagination or was a talented entertainer.

The common idiom referring to someone who looks at everything in an optimistic and rosy way is that they are looking through rose-coloured glasses. What is the equivalent idiom for someone who is cynical; that they are wearing polarisers?

XIII. Abridged Summary

Mencken's conservatism is not the opposite of romanticism; it is romanticism *par excellence*. Mencken did not worry about casting pearls before swine; he was the pearl already there. The world was his oyster.

Far from rejecting the world, Mencken enjoyed it. He was not an accomplice to its crimes, but an expert witness. He did not consent to it; he acquiesced sarcastically.

Mencken thought of the flag, not as some great symbol of high and mighty ideals, but realistically as a handkerchief. After all, he struggled to work when he had hay fever, which he succumbed to seasonally, much like most citizens do to symbols — which they are peppered with by the picky pecksniffian bluenoses running society, like they know what's what and what's not. He believed that the flag represents the very fabric of civilisation, and that civilisation unravels as the flag unfurls. As he said, “The moral order of the world runs aground on hay fever.”⁹² Consider, for example, the unflaggingly feverish religiosity of the typical response to a sneeze.

⁹⁰ *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 439.

⁹¹ *A Second Mencken Chrestomathy*, pp. 373-74.

⁹² H.L. Mencken, *Damn! A Book of Calumny* (New York: Philip Goodman Company, 1918), p. 52.

XIV. Applied Summary: Conservatism and Libertarians

Libertarians often show that governments of the past that are today considered to be tyrannical and unpopular, even by the establishment, share the same characteristics with popular governments today that are considered to be free and popular. With this argument they hope to bring about a widespread enlightenment, which will lead to a more just, free and prosperous society. But their observation also teaches something quite different, which libertarians often fail to acknowledge. As Mencken pointed out:

The fact is that some of the things that men and women have desired most ardently for thousands of years are not nearer realization to-day than they were in the time of Rameses, and that there is not the slightest reason for believing that they will lose their coyness on any near to-morrow. Plans for hurrying them on have been tried since the beginning; plans for forcing them overnight are in copious and antagonistic operation to-day; and yet they continue to hold off and elude us, and the chances are that they will keep on holding off and eluding us.⁹³

Most libertarians I have come across have not attempted to comprehend Mencken. They claim to have read him, profess to be a fan and often repeat their favourite passages; but they do not understand his conservatism. (These same libertarians often criticise non-libertarian fans of Mencken for not understanding his libertarianism.)

Mencken was one of the most popular libertarians ever. Even those who disagreed with his ideas praised his prose. For example, during WW2, when his politics were silenced, he wrote and got published, among many other things, two volumes of autobiographical memoirs. These were allowed to be printed by the wartime censors, and even had good sales during the war. In addition, pocket-sized but full-length Armed Services Editions were printed in massive numbers and distributed freely to soldiers at the expense of the government, who paid Mencken.

His influence was felt in a variety of places, from the study of the American language to the history of the bathtub, criticism to censorship, summariser of popular opinion to exemplar of minority opinion, editor to essayist, talent scout to publishing advisor, and much more, including romances ranging from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, which he inspired by his example and helped to get published, to *Ask the Dust*, which was written to impress him and the recent (2006) film of which stars him, to *Elmer Gantry*, which was dedicated to him. He was considered “worthy” of being the only speaker alongside FDR at an event during FDR's Presidency. He successfully rejected a Pulitzer Prize that wasn't even his; however, he was not so successful with the Nobel Prize.⁹⁴

Despite all this, Mencken's libertarian ideas never caught on and he never thought they would. Today, most libertarians — all of whom are inferior writers in inferior positions to Mencken — fail to speculate how to improve upon him, yet generally expect superior results. This is inexcusable, since, as Mencken said of his own archiving and writing, “Not many American authors will ever leave a more complete record ... There is, indeed, probably no trace in history of a writer who left more careful accounts of himself and his contemporaries.”⁹⁵ Even so, one need not read much Mencken to understand him, for he was as consistent as can be⁹⁶ and quite repetitive. Besides, he

⁹³ *Prejudices: Second Series*, pp. 213-14.

⁹⁴ *A Second Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 367.

⁹⁵ *Diary of H.L. Mencken*, pp. 207, 382.

⁹⁶ Mencken was so consistent that his arguments occasionally overlapped — that is, his attitude was consistent even when his interpretations were inconsistent. In other words, whatever the method, the results were always the same. There are some examples where “cf.” is mentioned in the footnotes of this essay.

was hardly the only libertarian who failed to popularise libertarianism; he was just very honest, humble and self-aware in admitting it without hesitation, cessation or shame.⁹⁷

Occasionally Mencken did have “a romantic moment,”⁹⁸ a fit of optimistic supposedly constructive advice. One example is worth addressing to prevent any false hope. He once said, “it is quite impossible to kill a passion by arguing against it. The way to kill it is to give rein under unfavorable and dispiriting conditions — to bring it down, by slow stages, to the estate of an absurdity and a horror.”⁹⁹ But absurdities and horrors of governments — including broken promises, wars, inflations, depressions and elections — have mostly reinforced popular misconceptions, and made the truth appear even more absurd to the ignorant.¹⁰⁰ So his remark is incorrect. Also, showing the absurdity of something somewhat resembles an argument, yet he said that argument cannot kill passion. So his remark is also tautological or oxymoronic.

Increased familiarity with Mencken's conservatism may lead to fewer libertarians, for many are emotionally committed to the success of activism — they live in hope. But because activism is so rarely successful this is not such a loss, as perhaps more focus will be put into writing as an art,

97 As was Ludwig von Mises, who said in his *Memoirs*, trans. Arlene Oost-Zinner (Auburn, Ala.: Mises Institute, 2009), p. 98: “From time to time I entertained the hope that my writings would bear practical fruit and show the way for policy. I have always looked for evidence of a change in ideology. But I never actually deceived myself; my theories explain, but cannot slow the decline of a great civilization. I set out to be a reformer, but only became the historian of decline.” It is amusing to compare this passage with the yearly reports, fundraising paraphernalia and written histories of many think tanks. For more on Mises's conservatism, see also the appendices of this essay.

98 For an instance of where Mencken admits having a romantic moment that he wished to correct, see *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 432-33.

99 *Ibid.*, p. 33; see also *Prejudices: Fourth Series*, p. 140, where Mencken says, “One horse-laugh is worth ten thousand syllogisms. It is not only more effective; it is also vastly more intelligent.” Ludwig von Mises argued the opposite in *Bureaucracy* (Grove City, PA: Libertarian Press, 1983), pp. 118-19: “[S]atirical books [have failed to change ‘the socialists’]. Some of the most eminent writers of the nineteenth century — Balzac, Dickens, Gogol, de Maupassant, Courteline — have struck devastating blows against bureaucratism. Aldous Huxley was even courageous enough to make socialism's dreamed paradise the target of his sardonic irony. The public was delighted. But his readers rushed nonetheless to apply for government jobs.”

100 Even when poor policies have been identified, it still does not necessarily make a difference. For example, Andrew Dickson White, *Fiat Money Inflation in France* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1933), pp. 5-7: “It would be a great mistake to suppose that the statesmen of France, or the French people, were ignorant of the dangers in issuing irredeemable paper money. No matter how skillfully the bright side of such a currency was exhibited, all thoughtful men in France remembered its dark side. They knew too well, from that ruinous experience, seventy years before, in John Law's time, the difficulties and dangers of a currency not well based and controlled. They had then learned how easy it is to issue it; how difficult it is to check its overissue; how seductively it leads to the absorption of the means of the workingmen and men of small fortunes; how heavily it falls on all those living on fixed incomes, salaries or wages; how securely it creates on the ruins of the prosperity of all men of meagre means a class of debauched speculators, the most injurious class that a nation can harbor, — more injurious, indeed, than professional criminals whom the law recognizes and can throttle; how it stimulates overproduction at first and leaves every industry flaccid afterward; how it breaks down thrift and develops political and social immorality. All this France had been thoroughly taught by experience. Many then living had felt the result of such an experiment — the issues of paper money under John Law ...; and there were then sitting in the National Assembly of France many who owed the poverty of their families to those issues of paper. Hardly a man in the country who had not heard those who issued it cursed as the authors of the most frightful catastrophe France had then experienced. ... It was no mere attempt at theatrical display, but a natural impulse, which led a thoughtful statesman, during the debate, to hold up a piece of that old paper money and to declare that it was stained with the blood and tears of their fathers ... And it would also be a mistake to suppose that the National Assembly, which discussed this matter, was composed of mere wild revolutionists; no inference could be more wide of the fact. Whatever may have been the character of the men who legislated for France afterward, no thoughtful student of history can deny, despite all the arguments and sneers of reactionary statesmen and historians, that few more keen-sighted legislative bodies have ever met than this first French Constitutional Assembly. In it were such men as Sieyès, Bailly, Necker, Mirabeau, Talleyrand, DuPont de Nemours and a multitude of others who, in various sciences and in the political world, had already shown and were destined afterward to show themselves among the strongest and shrewdest men that Europe has yet seen. ... Oratory prevailed over science and experience. In April, 1790, came the final decree to issue four hundred millions of *livres* in paper money ...”

which will last longer than any more emotionally-fuelled shorter-term activism. But that is probably misleading, since conservative libertarians often rush their writings and non-conservative libertarians have written many impressive and lasting pieces, both in the heat of the moment and in a calm calculated way for long-term deliverance.

Simply put (with less speculative empirical wrangling): the advantage of conservatism is that there is no real disappointment; the disadvantage of it, in terms of popularity, is that most people want to be in a situation where they can be disappointed, because they have the kind of mind that is currently disappointed and with the same mindset hope to escape it — disappointment fuels them. As Mencken said of those who remain optimists, “A man who has throttled a bad impulse has at least some consolation in his agonies, but a man who has throttled a good one is in a bad way indeed.”¹⁰¹

But this, obviously, only applies to one who believes that “goodness”, especially in the form of activism, can actually count, in the sense that being helpful to others will be considered so in the opinion of these same others also. This is not to say that good people do things for approval, but rather that if they are trying to help someone who does not feel helped by their action, then perhaps no help has taken place.

I'm not saying that much of Mencken's work is incompatible with indignation; only that he was not indignant personally. In fact, as he could see, “the man who is able to think things out for himself ... even if he is not romantic personally ... is very apt to spread discontent among those who are.”¹⁰² The same aptness to spread discontent applies when independent thinking takes the form of an argument against romanticism, or at least suggests the viability of an alternative – however, such “formerly romantic” minds will probably revert soon after.

There is nothing stopping conservatives from being activists. Successful communication of ideas and inducing change may not be a primary incentive of conservatives, but there are plenty of others reasons for activism, even if activism is not the best word for it. The conservative libertarian is not an enemy of the romantic libertarian. They may not share the same dreams and nightmares, but they do have a Platonic relationship. It is unlikely they would ever be hung alongside each other, but the conservative would definitely be nearby, enjoying the puppet-show.

And the indignant activism of libertarians is different to that of statist. In a passage written ostensibly to criticise indignant activists, Mencken does not fully differentiate between indignant libertarian activists and conservative libertarian non-activists like himself:

What I admire most in any man is a serene spirit, a steady freedom from moral indignation,

101 *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 162.

102 *Ibid.*, p. 145. To believe otherwise is to say that readers agree with everything they read, and authors always say the same as their readers. Similarly, George Jean Nathan said, “To argue ... that this or that critic is purely destructive is to imply that all his reading adherents are also of purely destructive tendencies.” [From his *Testament of a Critic* (New York: Knopf, 1931), p. 19; see also pp. 50-53.] And Bernard Shaw said: “Just as reading about crime does not make us criminals, but rather causes any propensities we may have had in that direction to waste themselves harmlessly through the imagination, so reading about high virtues does not make us heroes and heroines; it wastes our heroic impulse in precisely the same manner. Therefore it is very questionable whether reading rooms should contain any good books. Rather they should be stocked with the Newgate Calendar, detective stories, lives of Cartouche, Lacenaire, Charles Peace, Moll Flanders and all the most infamous characters in fact or fiction. And when the readers, in the disgust and satiety produced by such literature, go to the reading-room librarian and say 'For heaven's sake give me a book about a saint or a hero: I am sick to death of these stupid malefactors,' it should be the duty of that librarian to say, 'No my son (or my daughter, as the case may be): the proper sphere of virtue is the living world. Go out and do good until you feel wicked again. Then come back to me; and I will discharge all your evil impulses for you without hurting anyone by a batch of thoroughly bad books.' Moral: do not listen to the people who wish to purify public bookshelves: they are sitters on safety valves.” [Bernard Shaw, “Neglected Aspects of Public Libraries,” *The New Republic*, vol. XXIX, no. 368 (December 21, 1921), p. 97.]

an all-embracing tolerance — in brief, what is commonly called good sportsmanship. Such a man is not to be mistaken for one who shirks the hard knocks of life. On the contrary, he is frequently an eager gladiator, vastly enjoying opposition. But when he fights he fights in the manner of a gentleman fighting a duel, not that of a longshoreman clearing out a waterfront saloon.¹⁰³

Mencken's prose was often harsh, but he always defending the rights of his ideological opponents to put forward their case. He was so tolerant of people criticising him that he organised the publication of a book of such criticisms without any counterargument defending himself.¹⁰⁴ His tolerance, which was melded with his understanding that value is subjective, is also shown in the following passage. When asked to give advice to someone who doubted the truth of received opinion, but worried that continued doubting would never provide the kind of satisfaction experienced as a believer, Mencken commented:

[Are the thrills of the conservative] equal, as a maker of anything rationally describable as happiness, to the comfort and security of the man of faith? ... The skeptic ... will say yes; the believer will say no. There you have it.¹⁰⁵

In any case, Mencken's honest negativity provides libertarians with the strongest defence — short of imprisoning, maiming or killing their accusers and not believing that will make any difference anyway — against being derided as optimistic, romantic, uncritical, utopian, and having an overgenerously positive view of man. Instead of merely claiming that government is non-existent, impossible, criminal and destructive, it allows libertarians to take the extra step and become truly radical, by showing government as empty romanticism, and libertarianism, not as a competing romanticism, but as something distinct.

Appendices

XV. Nock's Remnant

Mencken's position should not be confused with Albert Jay Nock's "Isaiah's Job". Speaking to the Remnant is long term romanticism, which, in a way, is the most extreme form of hope-fuelled romanticism. Mencken also occasionally lapsed into such romanticism; for example, pleading for the slow development — just say, "When"! — of a libertarian aristocracy or influential group.

Marcus Aurelius said:

They refuse to admire their contemporaries, the people whose lives they share. No, but to be admired by Posterity — people they've never met and never will — that's what they set their hearts on. You might as well be upset at not being a hero to your great-grandfather.¹⁰⁶

If you change "admired" to "understood", then this is a perfect criticism of belief in the perfectibility or improveability of mankind. Mencken made a very similar comment to Marcus Aurelius when he said:

103 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

104 H.L. Mencken, *Menckenianna: A Schimpflexikon* (New York: Octagon Books, 1977).

105 *On Religion*, p. 37. See also, *Minority Report*, p. 141: "It seems to me that the gain to truth that [the loss of faith] involves is trivial when set beside the damage to the individual. To be sure, he is also improved, but he is almost wrecked in the process."

106 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Gregory Hays (London: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 2003), bk. 6, p. 73

There is a notion that judgments of living artists are impossible. They are bound to be corrupted, we are told, by prejudice, false perspective, mob emotion, error. The question whether this or that man is great or small is one which only posterity can answer. A silly begging of the question, for doesn't posterity also make mistakes?¹⁰⁷

But on the whole one gets the picture that both Mencken and Nock are as conservative as can be.

In this section we will go through some examples of Nock's conservatism, showing that Nock himself did not believe in "Isaiah's Job". To start with, it is worth noting that Nock himself, in the essay *Isaiah's Job* itself, said:

If I were young and had the notion of embarking in the prophetic line, I would certainly take up this branch of the business; and therefore I have no hesitation about recommending it as a career for anyone in that position.¹⁰⁸

But he was not young and he was not interested on embarking on a career in the prophetic line. So when people talk of Nock's Remnant, they do not talk of a Remnant that Nock wrote intentionally for. That Nock was a thoroughgoing conspicuous conservative like Mencken is clear from the following six passages:

1:

Il faut cultiver notre jardin [let us cultivate our garden]. With these words Voltaire ends his treatise called *Candide* ... To my mind, those few concluding words sum up the whole social responsibility of man. The only thing that the psychically-human being can do to improve society is to present society with *one improved unit*. ... [V]ery few among mankind have either the force of intellect to manage this method intelligently, or the force of character to apply it constantly. Hence if one "regards mankind as being what they are," the chances seem to be that the deceptively easier way will continue to prevail among them throughout an indefinitely long future. It is easy to prescribe improvement for others; it is easy to organise something, to institutionalise this-or-that, to pass laws, multiply bureaucratic agencies, form pressure-groups, start revolutions, change forms of government, tinker at political theory. The fact that these expedients have been tried unsuccessfully in every conceivable combination for six thousand years has not noticeably impaired a credulous unintelligent willingness to keep on trying them again and again. This being so, it seems highly probable that the hope for any significant improvement of society must be postponed.¹⁰⁹

2:

The British State has sold the Czech State down the river by a despicable trick; very well, be as disgusted and angry as you like, but don't be astonished; what would you expect? — just take a look at the British State's record! The German State is persecuting great masses of its people, the Russian State is holding a purge, the Italian State is grabbing territory, the Japanese State is buccaneering all along the Asiatic Coast; horrible, yes, but for Heaven's sake don't lose your head over it, for what would you expect? — look at the record!¹¹⁰

107 H.L. Mencken, *Book of Prefaces* (New York: Knopf, 1920), p. 61.

108 Albert Jay Nock, "Isaiah's Job," in his *State of the Union*, ed. Charles H. Hamilton (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), p. 270; the entire essay is relevant: p. 134.

109 Albert Jay Nock, *The Memoirs of a Superfluous Man* (Chicago: Gateway, 1969), pp. 307-08.

110 Albert Jay Nock, "The Criminality of the State," in his *State of the Union*, p. 270; the entire essay is relevant: pp. 269-75. This is similar to Bertrand de Jouvenel, *On Power*, ed. J.F. Huntington (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund,

3:

[I]f it were in my power to pull down its whole structure overnight and set up another of my own devising — to abolish the State out of hand, and replace it by an organization of the economic means — I would not do it, for the minds of Americans are far from fitted to any such great change as this.¹¹¹

4:

Taking the sum of the State's physical strength, with the force of powerful spiritual influences behind it, one asks ... what can be done against the State's progress in self-aggrandizement? Simply nothing. So far from encouraging any hopeful contemplation of the unattainable, the student of civilized man will offer no conclusion but that nothing can be done.¹¹²

5:

Even a successful revolution, if such a thing were conceivable, against the military tyranny which is Statism's last expedient, would accomplish nothing. The people would be as thoroughly indoctrinated with Statism after the revolution as they were before, and therefore the revolution would be no revolution, but a *coup d'Etat*, by which the citizen would gain nothing but a mere change of oppressors. There have been many revolutions in the last twenty-five years, and this has been the sum of their history. They amount to no more than an impressive testimony to the great truth that there can be no right action except there be right thinking behind it. As long as the easy, attractive, superficial philosophy of Statism remains in control of the citizen's mind, no beneficent social change can be effected, whether by revolution or by any other means.¹¹³

6:

Sometimes people who knew me to be a believer in Henry George have wondered that I do not crusade for it or even say much about it. But much more than a sound economic system is necessary; you have to have sound people to work it ... The wise social philosophers were those who merely hung up their ideas and left them hanging, for men to look at or to pass by, as they chose. Jesus and Socrates did not even trouble to write theirs out, and Marcus Aurelius wrote his only in crabbed memoranda for his own use, never thinking anyone else would see them.¹¹⁴

This passage mentions Marcus Aurelius, whom we quoted at the beginning of this section. Nock was a big fan of his. Here is a relevant Marcus Aurelius passage, the latter-part of which Nock

1993), p. 186: "Only those who know nothing of any time but their own, who are completely in the dark as to the manner of Power's behaving through thousands of years, would regard these proceedings ['the income tax'] as the fruit of a particular set of doctrines. They are in fact the normal manifestations of Power, and differ not at all in their nature from Henry VIII's confiscation of the wealth of the monasteries. The same principle is at work; the hunger for authority, the thirst for resources; and in all these operations the same characteristics are present, including the rapid elevation of the dividers of the spoils."

111 Albert Jay Nock, "Anarchist's Progress," in his *State of the Union*, p. 51.

112 Albert Jay Nock, *Our Enemy, the State* (Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, 1946), p. 203. This passage was quoted earlier in the essay.

113 Albert Jay Nock's "Introduction" to Herbert Spencer, *The Man Versus The State* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), p. xxx.

114 Albert Jay Nock, *A Journal of These Days* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1934), p. 30:

quoted:

Evil: the same old thing. Whatever happens, keep this in mind: It's the same old thing, from one end of the world to the other. It fills the history books, ancient and modern, and the cities, and the houses too. Familiar, transient ... Look at the past — empire succeeding empire — and from that, extrapolate the future: the same thing. No escape from the rhythm of events. Which is why observing life for forty years is as good as a thousand. Would you really see anything new?¹¹⁵

That Nock, like Mencken and Bierce, enjoyed the spectacle and was not disappointed by it, here is one more Nock passage:

The war was detestable enough, but the anthropoid jobholders who engineered it and the masses whom they coerced and exploited were doing the best that the limitations of their nature admitted of their doing, and one could expect no more than that. There was even a certain grave beauty, such as one observes in a battle of snakes or sharks, in the machinations which they contrived in order to fulfil the law of their being. One regarded these creatures with abhorrence, yes; sometimes with boredom and annoyance, yes; but with despondency and disappointment, no.¹¹⁶

Yes, “sometimes,” as Nock said, politics fills conservatives “with boredom.” There aren't many forms of entertainment that don't have occasional slow patches and off-days. This brings us to the next section, which is on a significant critic of politics as entertainment.

XVI. Nathan's Criticism of the Entertainment Value of Politics

George Jean Nathan is a credible judge of the entertainment value of politics. He was a brilliant theatre critic and a long-time co-editor with H.L. Mencken. Nathan criticised the entertainment value of politics on the following grounds:

The slapstick that lands to the rear of a politician, however eminent, and the one that lands to the rear of a stage pantaloone are, to me, one and the same, and the respective seats upon which the slapsticks land are no less one and the same. And when it is argued that politics provides the greater and lewder show because in the theatre one has to pretend that the slapstické is someone of dignity and consequence in order properly to appreciate the humors of his embarrassment consequent upon the receipt of the wallop, I argue in turn that one has to pretend exactly the same thing in the case of politics ... If the essence of humor lies in the sharp contrast between dignity and importance on the one hand and sudden disaster and ignominy on the other, one may inquire as to the dignity and importance of the politician. That dignity and importance exist simply in the mind of the spectator, through a voluntary remission of judgment, exactly as in the case of a good stage actor.¹¹⁷

But his criticism does not stand up, even if we take a look at Nathan's own observations.

Here is a wide-ranging condemnation of many areas of society, where clearly Nathan himself chose politics for the punchline because he found that the most amusing:

115 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, bk. 7, p. 85; and pp. 92-93. Nock quoted the latter passage in *The Memoirs of a Superfluous Man*, p. 309. On p. 305 and p. 321 Nock praises Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* as “the best of handbooks to the art of living” and “the best of all autobiographies”.

116 Albert Jay Nock, *The Memoirs of a Superfluous Man*, p. 313.

117 George Jean Nathan, *The Autobiography of An Attitude* (London: Knopf, 1925), pp. 34-35.

Over a period of eighty years, hundreds of critics have been laboring to improve the taste of the American people in music, literature, drama and politics. And today, as a result, Nevin, Tobani and Tosti are program favorites over Brahms, Beethoven and Bach; James Oliver Curwood is thirty thousand times more popular than James Branch Cabell; Anne Nichols is fifty thousand times more popular than Hauptmann; and Calvin Coolidge is President of the United States.¹¹⁸

Here is the most cutting and amusing observation on populist focus-group census-based election-campaigned government:

Politics is a peep-show the particular low humor of which is derived from the circumstance that the performers have their eyes glued to the other end of the same keyhole that is used by the onlooking customers.¹¹⁹

Nathan made that observation of politicians, not stage-actors. Only someone who finds politics highly amusing could have written that. And surely every who merely reads it would find politics amusing also.

This last Nathan quote about politics being a peep-show also applies to those who proclaim what is “realistic” or “unrealistic” policy espousal in terms of potential for acceptance, ignoring the extremely unpredictable force of ideas. This results in discouragement of uncompromising stances. Here is a passage reminiscent of Nathan's from Clarence Philbrook:

Major economic policy, in so far as it is influenced at all by economists, apparently [according to “sensible” “realists”] ought to be the product of infinite involutions of guesses by each about what others are guessing about what he is guessing about what they will advocate!¹²⁰

This is a justification of Mencken's truth-telling that Mencken did not use. In the next sections, some more justifications of Mencken's position that Mencken did not use are discussed.

XVII. Hayek on the Success of Socialist Ideas

F.A. Hayek's *The Intellectuals and Socialism* explores why socialists were so successful in communicating their ideas. Hayek said it is because the socialist experts remained radical and utopian, had long-term aims, and left the compromising to others. They did not have a “naive view of mass democracy” and try “directly to reach and to persuade the individual voter.” Rather, they “directed their main effort toward gaining the support of [the intellectual] 'elite.’”¹²¹ The definition of “elite,” “expert” and “intellectual” that Hayek uses may not be the most intuitive definitions, and perhaps that alone explains why some think tanks erroneously think they are following Hayek's strategy when they gain the ear of ambitious present and future politicians. Many self-proclaimed free market think tanks quote Hayek's flowery call to action and ultimatum from the end of that essay prominently on their mission statements:

Unless we can make the philosophic foundations of a free society once more a living

118 George Jean Nathan, *The House of Satan* (London: Knopf, 1926), p. 99.

119 George Jean Nathan, *The Autobiography of An Attitude*, p. 38.

120 Clarence Philbrook, “‘Realism’ in Policy Espousal,” *The American Economic Review*, vol. 43, no. 5 (December, 1953), pp. 846-59.

121 F.A. Hayek, *The Intellectuals and Socialism* (California: Institute for Humane Studies, 1971), p. 6.

intellectual issue, and its implementation a task which challenges the ingenuity and imagination of our liveliest minds, the prospects of freedom are indeed dark. But if we can regain that belief in the power of ideas which was the mark of liberalism at its best, the battle is not lost.¹²²

The passage is found at the conclusion of the essay. It is a concluding statement that had many reasons behind it, but the passage itself does not emphasise them clearly, probably because it is meant more as a signing-off than a summary. In the paragraph immediately above the previous quote, Hayek is as plainspoken and content-strong as can be:

What we lack is a liberal Utopia, a program which seems neither a mere defense of things as they are nor a diluted kind of socialism, but a truly liberal radicalism which does not spare the susceptibilities of the mighty (including the trade unions), which is not too severely practical, and which does not confine itself to what appears today as politically possible. We need intellectual leaders who are prepared to resist the blandishments of power and influence and who are willing to work for an ideal, however small the prospects of its early realization. They must be men who are willing to stick to principles and to fight for their full realization, however remote. **The practical compromises they must leave to the politicians.** Free trade and freedom of opportunity are ideals which still may arouse the imaginations of large numbers, but a mere “reasonable freedom of trade” or a mere “relaxation of controls” is neither intellectually respectable nor likely to inspire any enthusiasm.¹²³

Most think tanks that use the first block-quote in this subsection, ignore the second. They avoid utopian thought, and, seemingly as a result, have utopian expectations for their strategy of compromising to the current intellectual climate and espousing a mere “reasonable freedom of trade” and “relaxation of controls.”

Ignoring the Austrian school of economics is bad enough, but quoting Hayek on strategy misleadingly, that's a different dimension of debasement. Perhaps no one in those think tanks has read the essay, and just repeat the quote they found elsewhere. That Hayek himself did not always follow his own instructions may also be to blame.

Hayek displays a more “polite” and “constructive” tone in his writing compared to Mencken. Hayek believed “it is neither selfish interests nor evil intentions but mostly honest convictions and good intentions”¹²⁴ that determine the views of political apologists, and that what is needed is for them to be shown the error of their ways. It is interesting to note how perfectly compatible Hayek and Mencken are on strategy, despite having vastly different intentions and opinions about their readers.

XVIII. The Laffer Curve

Walter Block's “Is There an 'Anomalous' Section of the Laffer Curve?” explains why lower taxes, drug legalisation and a voluntary rather than drafted military may not result in libertarian outcomes.¹²⁵ Lower taxes, with the Laffer Curve, may result in the enrichment and enlargement of government through taxes. Drug legalisation may result in government taxing drugs and enriching and enlarging itself from it. And a voluntary military may mean that wars are not as unpopular and rare as they would be with a draft.

122 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

123 *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26. The emboldening is my own.

124 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

125 Walter E. Block, “Is There an 'Anomalous' Section of the Laffer Curve?” *Libertarian Papers* 2, 8 (2010).

Block explores what this means from the perspective of enforcing law and punishing law-breakers. Applying the same arguments to the question of activism strategy raises an even larger difficulty for the libertarian movement. For example, consider Hayek's comment:

It may be that a free society as we have known it carries in itself the forces of its own destruction, that once freedom has been achieved it is taken for granted and ceases to be valued, and that the free growth of ideas which is the essence of a free society will bring about the destruction of the foundations on which it depends.¹²⁶

As the saying goes, "he who endeavors to conquer more efficiently the passing over of a ditch sometimes reduces the difficulty by stepping back eight or ten paces."¹²⁷ Libertarians often find that taking things to their logical extremes with verbal argumentation is a good way to get the message across. Surely, taking things to their logical extremes with real world occurrences would serve the same purpose. And when all is calm it may make sense to stick to the straight and narrow, but rarely are people calm and considerate when it comes to politics, so sailing in a crooked zig-zag manner, depending on which way the winds of sentiment are blowing, may make political sense and be less precarious than trying to stick to the straight and narrow.

Given these arguments, Mencken's attitude, beliefs and choices are further vindicated. Writing to *persuade* can leave you with many peculiar stances. But writing to *express* your libertarian beliefs is a much more straightforward enterprise, and your writing is then relevant forever and won't come back to haunt you.

XIX. Grounding Political Debate

In my essay, "Grounding Political Debate,"¹²⁸ I address some common errors by libertarians that mislead them into believing: that libertarian reform would be easier than it is; that it would please and benefit as many people as they claim; and that pleasing and benefiting others is such a worthwhile aim. My essay reinforces Mencken's position using some arguments that Mencken used and some that he didn't.

XX. Mises on Inflationary Pride and Deflationary Blame

Mencken's low opinion of humanity and their prospects for improvement is further supported by Ludwig von Mises's summary of the world economy:

¹²⁶ *The Intellectuals and Socialism*, p. 25. That the opposite may also be true, see Alexis de Tocqueville, *The State of Society in France Before the Revolution of 1789*, trans. Henry Reeve (London: John Murray, 1888), p. 152:

"[T]he French found their position the more intolerable the better it became ... It is not always by going from bad to worse that a country falls into revolution. It happens most frequently that a people, which had supported the most crushing laws without complaint, and apparently as if they were unfelt, throws them off with violence as soon as the burden begins to be diminished. The state of things destroyed by a revolution is always slightly better than that which had immediately preceded it; and experience has shown that the most dangerous moment for a bad government is usually that when it enters upon the work of reform. Nothing short of a great political genius can save the sovereign who undertakes to relieve his subjects after a long period of oppression. The evils which were endured with patience so long as they were inevitable seem intolerable as soon as hope can be entertained about escaping from them. The abuses which are removed seem to lay bare those which remain, and to render the sense of them more acute; the evil has decreased, it is true, but the perception of the evil is more keen."

¹²⁷ Giordano Bruno, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, trans. and ed. Arthur D. Imerti (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), p. 91. I don't know if this is where the phrase originated. I'd appreciate being informed of earlier occurrences.

¹²⁸ Benjamin Marks, "Grounding Political Debate," *Libertarian Papers* 1, 18 (2009).

The boom produces impoverishment. But still more disastrous are its moral ravages. It makes people despondent and dispirited. The more optimistic they were under the illusory prosperity of the boom, the greater is their despair and their feeling of frustration. The individual is always ready to ascribe his good luck to his own efficiency and to take it as a well-deserved reward for his talent, application, and probity. But reverses of fortune he always charges to other people, and most of all to the absurdity of social and political institutions. He does not blame the authorities for having fostered the boom. He reviles them for the inevitable collapse. In the opinion of the public, more inflation and more credit expansion are the only remedy against the evils which inflation and credit expansion have brought about.¹²⁹

The entire passage, especially the last sentence, is very Menckonian. Mises also saw, more intricately than Mencken did, that governments tend to grow.¹³⁰

XXI. A Menckonian Strategy for Libertarian Activism

In the following two paragraphs Mises describes the problems for libertarian activism in a manner reminiscent of Mencken:

If men will not, from a recognition of social necessity, voluntarily do what must be done if society is to be maintained and general well-being advanced, no one can lead them to the right path by any cunning stratagem or artifice. If they err and go astray, then one must endeavor to enlighten them by instruction. But if they cannot be enlightened, if they persist in error, then nothing can be done to prevent catastrophe. All the tricks and lies of demagogic politicians may well be suited to promote the cause of those who, whether in good faith or bad, work for the destruction of society. But the cause of social progress, the cause of the further development and intensification of social bonds, cannot be advanced by lies and demagogy. No power on earth, no crafty stratagem or clever deception could succeed in duping mankind into accepting a social doctrine that it not only does not acknowledge, but openly spurns. ...

The liberals were of the opinion that all men have the intellectual capacity to reason correctly about the difficult problems of social cooperation and to act accordingly. They were so impressed with the clarity and self-evidence of the reasoning by which they had arrived at their political ideas that they were quite unable to understand how anyone could fail to comprehend it. They never grasped two facts: first, that the masses lack the capacity to think logically and secondly, that in the eyes of most people, even when they are able to recognize the truth, a momentary, special advantage that may be enjoyed immediately appears more important than a lasting greater gain that must be deferred. Most people do not have even the intellectual endowments required to think through the – after all very complicated – problems of social cooperation, and they certainly do not have the will power necessary to make those provisional sacrifices that all social action demands. The slogans of interventionism and of socialism, especially proposals for the partial expropriation of private property, always find ready and enthusiastic approval with the masses, who expect to profit directly and immediately from them.¹³¹

129 Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action* (Auburn, Ala.: Mises Institute, 1998), p. 574.

130 The best essay on this dynamic is Herbert Spencer, "The Coming Slavery," in his *The Man Versus the State* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), pp. 31-70, esp. pp. 44-51, 53-57.

131 Ludwig von Mises, *Liberalism*, trans. Ralph Raico (New York: Foundation for Economic Education, 1985), pp. 156-58.

The issue for activism is how to attract statists to the libertarian position so that they may “expect to profit directly and immediately” from it. I have an idea that is a “crafty stratagem”, but does not require government do anything, so is probably not what Mises was writing against. Indeed, I don't think Mises ever thought of this scheme, and I think it may have a slightly better chance of success than those tried previously.

Instead of putting so much money towards another libertarian electoral drive, another libertarian advertising campaign, another libertarian position paper, another libertarian journal, another libertarian conference, another libertarian group, another revival of a neglected libertarian thinker, another better-worded and better-reasoned libertarian essay, another libertarian essay contest, or another lecture tour of an illustrious libertarian, why not do something different? I am not saying that the aforementioned activities should stop. Indeed, I am currently working on many libertarian essays, and making more accessible the work of many neglected libertarian thinkers, and will continue to do so. I am only saying that they are unlikely to have a positive libertarian outcome, since they have barely ever done so before. Of course, there may be a very slim chance that it will happen, and those who are romantic — that is, are emotionally needy — may be fuelled by this, but does that mean that those who are financially needy should buy lottery tickets, and spend much time trying to convince the lottery organisers why they should be the winner?

So, what else is there? How do we get those unfamiliar with libertarian ideas to pay attention to us? Is there any strategy for libertarian reform that hasn't been tried yet?

Libertarians have tried to show that, in a free market, society would be freer and more prosperous, trying to appeal to people's self-interest. This has not worked, because, the connection of libertarian ideas, through economic reasoning, to one's self-interest, is too distant for most people. What they want and appreciate is direct short-term rewards and handouts. Only then will they be interested. So my proposal is this: Why don't libertarian philanthropists pay people to read up on libertarian ideas and point out where they're wrong? Don't pay people to rewrite the same old libertarian arguments; pay people to read and criticise them. Here's a possible press release:

\$??? to sincerely and thoughtfully criticise the libertarian position that tax is theft and government criminal.

Earn money by emailing us your criticism of libertarianism. The only catch is that you must not merely state, for example, that you think we need government because of the public goods problem, you must also explain why you believe the criticism of the public goods problem as justification for government found here [make available libertarian writing on it and hyperlink] is incorrect.

The competition is not in any way approved, overseen or verified by any authority. You will have to rely on the honesty of [judge or organisation name] instead. We do not need to be convinced by your criticisms (although we will try), but if they show you made some effort to comprehend and contemplate the libertarian arguments, then you will receive the money. We admit that some people may think the judging to be idiosyncratic and arbitrary, but we will try to be consistent, fair and forgivingly generous. We will have the right to publish the criticisms and any correspondence entered into, and will be glad to. You are also welcome to donate your criticisms to us, for which we will be forever thankful. After all, being libertarian is very unpopular, and if only someone would show us the error of our ways, then we would live more contentedly, get on better with our fellows and fit better in the community.

This press release should be put on a web page that includes almost all objections to libertarianism and easy to understand libertarian responses to them.

If the web page is good enough, no money need ever change hands at all, since any criticism will just show that the reader has not read through the libertarian arguments sincerely and thoughtfully enough. The arrogance to hold the competition, attract many entries and not pay anyone, would attract attention. So would the arrogance of paying. I think it would be good to pay a great many of the entrants, but in addition, publish their criticism and libertarian responses to them. Government might give many handouts, but their handouts often mean lots of paperwork and bureaucracy to get through. That people prefer rewards sooner rather than later is one of the axioms of praxeology, so why are praxeologists always advocating futile schemes ignoring the fact? Can't libertarians do a better job of giving handouts than government? Is that what the success of libertarian ideas comes down to? Could there be a more cynical example of romanticism, and *vice versa*?

Now, we can't finish an essay on Mencken with a romantic call-to-action. I have tried and failed to get funding for this idea. In any case, if you are interested in how I envision the website for the competition be designed, please browse the middle and right columns of www.economics.org.au.

It has, as far as I can tell, been a total failure (as expected) in terms of convincing people of anarchocapitalism or getting them to engage with it. The main reason for this is, as David Stove said:

[A]dequacy or completeness is not the only desideratum of *surveyability*, which must be met if a nosology [list of ways thought goes wrong] is to be useful. A nosology could be completely adequate and completely useless: for example, by containing too many categories — a billion, say. In that case the nosology itself would be as unsurveyable as the vast mass of raw facts which it exists to digest for us.

... Must a nosology of thought be either far too short to be adequate, or far too long to be useful? ...

... [Y]ou cannot reasonably expect rational thought to *win*. You could as reasonably expect a thousand unbiased dice, all tossed at once, all to come down “five,” say. There are simply far too many ways, and easy ways, in which human thought can go wrong.¹³²

And that is yet another argument that justifies Mencken's position that Mencken did not use.

132 David Stove, *The Plato Cult and Other Philosophical Follies* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 195, 196, 202.