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Philadelphia Talk on Education
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My assignment today is not to talk about my view of education, although I will manage to slip a few of my views in.

Actually my view of education is quite simple. Based on Herbert Spencer's insight that "it takes varied reiterations to force alien concepts upon reluctant minds."

But my primary purpose today is to discuss and comment on Ben Rogge's view on education—not all of his views, but focused view on his thinking regarding the role of the state in providing and financing education.

Ben Rogge was an economist, and a man of great wit, charm and insight into the human condition—insight that drew heavily on his understanding of economics.

Rogge was a very good economist for a number of reasons. But the characteristic that made him stand out is his ability to put Herbert Spencer's insight into practice.

He understood that economic concepts are alien to most people. The concepts are quite simple, but the implications are often counter intuitive.

For example—the real wages of a country's workers is reduced by import restriction that protect them against competition from lower-paid foreign workers.

Rogge had a natural knack for reiterating economic concepts, and their implications, in straightforward and entertaining ways that made them understandable and less alien.

This contrasts with the approach of many economists who never recover from what they learned in graduate school, which is how to take simple concepts and render them completely incomprehensible.

Rogge spent his career at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana and was a good friend and confidant of Pierre Goodrich, the founder of Liberty Fund.

My comments today on education are largely taken, and inspired, by the paper by Rogge and Pierre Goodrich titled "education in a free society," first published in 1973. This paper is a chapter in a book I have edited on Rogge's writings, a book titled *A Maverick's Defense of Freedom: Selected Writings and Speeches of Benjamin A. Rogge* which will be published by Liberty Fund next year.

"education in a free society" considers the "ideal educational arrangement . . . In a society of free and responsible [people]"

This is also taken to mean an educational arrangement that helps promote and maintain the other social arrangements, or institutions, that are essential if we are to have and promote and maintain a society of free and responsible people.

The importance of education if we are to have a society consistent with free and responsible people is part of what Rogge and Goodrich see as an apparent paradox.

Their fundamental argument is that in a free society educational choices are "not a proper concern of the state." (p. 191) but the apparent paradox follows from the view that without the state having some influence over educational choices we are not likely to get

education that promotes an understanding of the desirability of freedom and the institutional arrangements required by a free society.

Rogge and Goodrich argue that state intervention into educational choices is both unnecessary and undesirable a way to assure that educational serve the cause of freedom. They argue that the most effective advocates for limited government and individual liberty have typically not been paid agents of the state. And that public supported education has more often than not been a training ground for those who attack the principle of limited government and liberty.

Their uncompromising position is that the state should have nothing to do with educational arrangements “except, of course, as the state protects the citizens from force and fraud in this area, as in all others.” (p. 193)

It should be pointed out that protecting against fraud in education is a tough assignment. In one sense, most education throughout history has been a fraud.

George Stigler wrote an article titled “a sketch of the history of truth in teaching” in which students got the right to sue their professors and university for intellectual malpractice. In the decision establishing that right the judge states “[i]t seems paradoxical beyond endurance to rule that a manufacturer of shampoos may not endanger a student’s scalp, but a premier educational institution is free to stuff his skull with nonsense.” The field of development economics was outlawed by the court because “no university could pay for the damage its teachers did.”

Of course, the problem is that education couldn’t perform its function without generating and distributing large loads of nonsense.

Improving knowledge is largely a process of revealing error and that requires a free competition of ideas most of which will be discarded and mercifully forgotten, if not discovered to be so ridiculous that they are worth saving for amusement.

This would seem to add support for Rogge’s and Goodrich’s argument against government involvement. State support of education has surely increased the ability of mistaken and, in some cases, fraudulent ideas to persist by making it more difficult for ideas disruptive to established interests to compete with ideas favoring the status quo. But, as Jim Buchanan is fond of pointing out, in policy debates “we always start from where we are.” And where we are is with an educational system that is largely operated and funded by government, and heavily influenced by political considerations.

So even if we agree entirely with Rogge’s and Goodrich’s objective of eliminating government funded education, we would be wise to make the case as effectively as possible, and that means operating at least initially within the existing educational structure.

As Buchanan is also fond of pointing out, there is a fundamental distinction between making decisions on the rules that we play by, and making decisions within the rules that currently exist.

I doubt that Rogge or Goodrich would disagree with Buchanan on this two points. But it is interesting that Rogge and Goodrich do not address the issue of educational vouchers.

They do make much the same argument for private education that voucher advocates make for vouchers.

They end their paper by pointing to the advantages of having payments for education coming directly from the student, or the student's parents, rather than from the government.

But in none of Rogge's writing, either in the book i edited or in his book *Can Capitalism Survive?* Published by Liberty Fund in 1979 can I find any discussion of vouchers.

Educational vouchers are obviously a half-way measure to protecting education against political influence.

And likely Rogge is being strategic by staking out what most will consider an extreme position and in doing so make half-way measures seem more reasonable.

However, when making a case for full-cost pricing of higher education (both in a long chapter in *Can Capitalism Survive?* and in an abbreviated chapter in the book I edited), Rogge makes the case "that traditional arrangements [subsidizing higher education] cannot be quickly or with ease." With this in mind he suggests some intermediate steps. So it is not clear what Rogge's view on educational vouchers was. He certainly knew about vouchers and knew the argument for them.

This reminds me of the late Marshal Fritz, who founded the movement "separation of school and state. Marshal was opposed to vouchers, and several times I heard him publicly give me credit for convincing him that vouchers were a bad idea.

Although I always felt honored to be credited with such persuasiveness, I also felt a little awkward about this honor since I supported vouchers, and still do.

Marshal said the blinding light leading to his conversion was an article I wrote in 1986 titled "The Political Economy of Educational Vouchers," *The Freeman* (July 1986), pp. 244-248.

I didn't think of the article as opposing vouchers so much as recognizing some political realities. In particular, the same political considerations that allowed the interests of the public school lobby to trump the interests of students would still be operating (if somewhat less effectively) to undermine the advantages of any political viable voucher program.

But still a move in the right direction.

On page 188 the possibility is mentioned that education might lead a man to choose virtuous behavior (with it understood that a society of free and responsible people requires some minimal amount of virtue on the part of those people).

While Rogge and Goodrich express their doubt that a man can be truly good, yet essentially ignorant, they also doubt that "the saint and the scholar are necessarily one and the same."

They point out in the Faust myth that it is the most learned who are most susceptible to the temptations of the devil (to the lure of temporal power over others).

They suggest that this may provide a good explanation of the behavior and politics of modern intellectuals.

Maybe for later. It may be that it is not the social institutions that do the most to promote and maintain free and responsible individuals are not those that demand the most virtue but those that demand the least. Maintaining those institutions require a minimum amount of virtue (Adam Smith) but given enough virtue to maintain them, little additional virtue is required.

