

Libertarianism Through Thick and Thin

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To what extent should libertarians concern themselves with social commitments, practices, projects, or movements that seek social outcomes beyond, or other than, the standard libertarian commitment to expanding the scope of freedom from government coercion?

Clearly, a consistent and principled libertarian cannot support efforts or beliefs that are contrary to libertarian principles — such as efforts to engineer social outcomes by means of government intervention. But if coercive laws have been taken off the table, then what should libertarians say about other religious, philosophical, social, or cultural commitments that pursue their ends through noncoercive means, such as targeted moral agitation, mass education, artistic or literary propaganda, charity, mutual aid, public praise, ridicule, social ostracism, targeted boycotts, social investing, slowdowns and strikes in a particular shop, general strikes, or other forms of solidarity and coordinated action? Which social movements should they oppose, which should they support, and toward which should they counsel indifference? And how do we tell the difference?

In other words, should libertarianism be seen as a “thin” commitment, which can be happily joined to absolutely any set of values and projects, “so long as it is peaceful,” or is it better to treat it as one strand among others in a “thick” bundle of intertwined social commitments? Such disputes are often intimately connected with other disputes concerning the specifics of libertarian rights theory or class analysis and the mechanisms of social power. To grasp what’s at stake, it will be necessary to make the question more precise and to tease out the distinctions among some of the different possible relationships between libertarianism and “thicker” bundles of social, cultural, religious, or philosophical commitments, which might recommend integrating the two on some level or another.

The forms of “thickness” I am about to discuss should not be confused with two other kinds of commitments, one tightly and one loosely connected to libertarianism: those logically entailed by the philosophy itself (what I call “thickness in entailment”), such as opposition to private aggression, and those that relate simply to being a good person (“thickness in conjunction”), such as being a loving parent. As an example of the first category, it might be argued that libertarians ought to actively oppose certain traditional cultural practices that involve the systematic use of violence against peaceful people — such as East African customs of forcing clitoridectomy on unwilling girls or the American and European custom of judges and juries ignoring the facts and the law to acquit or reduce the sentence for men who murdered unfaithful wives or their lovers. Principled libertarianism logically entails criticism of these social and cultural practices for the same reason that it entails criticism of government intervention: because the nonaggression principle condemns any violence against individual rights to life, liberty, and property, regardless of who commits it, and not just forms that are officially practiced by government.

Between the tightest and the loosest possible connections, at least four other kinds of connections might exist between libertarianism and further social commitments, offering a number of important, but subtly distinct, avenues for thick libertarian analysis and criticism.

Thickness for Application

First, there might be some commitments that a libertarian can reject without formally contradicting the nonaggression principle, but which she cannot reject without in fact interfering with its proper application. Principles beyond libertarianism alone may be necessary for determining

where my rights end and yours begin, or for stripping away conceptual blinders that prevent certain violations of liberty from being recognized as such.

Consider the way in which garden-variety political collectivism prevents many nonlibertarians from even recognizing taxation or legislation by a democratic government as being forms of coercion in the first place. (After all, didn't "we" consent to it?) Or, perhaps more controversially, think of the feminist criticism of the traditional division between the "private" and the "political" sphere, and of those who divide the spheres in such a way that pervasive, systemic violence and coercion within families turn out to be justified, or excused, or simply ignored as something "private" and therefore less than a serious form of violent oppression. If feminists are right about the way in which sexist political theories protect or excuse systematic violence against women, there is an important sense in which libertarians, because they are libertarians, should also be feminists. Importantly, the commitments that libertarians need to have here aren't just applications of general libertarian principle to a special case; the argument calls in resources other than the nonaggression principle to determine just where and how the principle is properly applied. Thus the thickness called for is thicker than logical entailment, but the cash value of the thick commitments is the direct contribution they make toward the complete application of the nonaggression principle.

Thickness from Grounds

Second, libertarians have many different ideas about the theoretical foundation for the nonaggression principle — that is, about the best reasons for being a libertarian. But whatever general foundational beliefs a given libertarian has, those beliefs may have some logical implications other than libertarianism alone. Thus there may be cases in which certain beliefs or commitments could be rejected without contradicting the nonaggression principle per se, but could not be rejected without logically undermining the deeper reasons that justify the nonaggression principle. Although you could consistently accept libertarianism without accepting these commitments or beliefs, you could not do so reasonably: Rejecting the commitments means rejecting the proper grounds for libertarianism.

Consider the conceptual reasons that libertarians have to oppose authoritarianism, not only as enforced by governments but also as expressed in culture, business, the family, and civil society. Social systems of status and authority include not only exercises of coercive power by the government, but also a knot of ideas, practices, and institutions based on deference to traditionally constituted authority. In politics these patterns of deference show up most clearly in the honorary titles, submissive etiquette, and unquestioning obedience traditionally expected by, and willingly extended to, heads of state, judges, police, and other visible representatives of government "law and order." Although these rituals and habits of obedience exist against the backdrop of statist coercion and intimidation, they are also often practiced voluntarily. Similar kinds of deference are often demanded from workers by bosses, or from children by parents or teachers. Submission to traditionally constituted authorities is reinforced not only through violence and threats, but also through art, humor, sermons, written history, journalism, child-rearing, and so on.

Although political coercion is the most distinctive expression of political inequality, you could — in principle — have a consistently authoritarian social order without any use of force. Even in

a completely free society, everyone could, in principle, still voluntarily agree to bow and scrape and speak only when spoken to in the presence of the (mutually agreed-on) town chief, or unthinkingly agree to obey whatever restrictions and regulations he tells them to follow in their own business or personal lives, or agree to give him as much in voluntary “taxes” on their income or property as he might ask. So long as the expectation of submission and the demands for wealth to be rendered were backed up only by verbal harangues, cultural glorifications of the wise and virtuous authorities, social ostracism of “unruly” dissenters, and so on, these demands would violate no one’s individual rights to liberty or property.

But while there’s nothing logically inconsistent about a libertarian envisioning — or even championing — this sort of social order, it would certainly be weird. Noncoercive authoritarianism may be consistent with libertarian principles, but it is hard to reasonably reconcile the two. Whatever reasons you may have for rejecting the arrogant claims of power-hungry politicians and bureaucrats — say, for example, the Jeffersonian notion that all men and women are born equal in political authority and that no one has a natural right to rule or dominate other people’s affairs — probably serve just as well for reasons to reject other kinds of authoritarian pretension, even if they are not expressed by means of coercive government action. While no one should be forced as a matter of policy to treat her fellows with the respect due to equals, or to cultivate independent thinking and contempt for the arrogance of power, libertarians certainly can — and should — criticize those who do not, and exhort our fellows not to rely on authoritarian social institutions, for much the same reasons that we have for endorsing libertarianism in the first place.

Strategic Thickness — The Causes of Liberty

Third, there also may be cases in which certain ideas, practices, or projects are entailed by neither the nonaggression principle nor the best reasons for it, and are not logically necessary for its correct application, either, but are preconditions for implementing the nonaggression principle in the real world. Although rejecting these ideas, practices, or projects would be logically compatible with libertarianism, their success might be important or even necessary for libertarianism to get much purchase in an existing statist society, or for a future free society to emerge from statism without widespread poverty or social conflict, or for a future free society to sustain itself against aggressive statist neighbors, the threat of civil war, or an internal collapse back into statism.

To the extent that other ideas, practices, or projects are preconditions for a flourishing free society, libertarians have strategic reasons to endorse them, even if they are conceptually independent of libertarian principles.

Thus, for example, left-libertarians such as Roderick Long have argued that libertarians have genuine reasons to be concerned about large inequalities of wealth or large numbers of people living in absolute poverty, and to support voluntary associations, such as mutual-aid societies and voluntary charity. Not because free market principles somehow logically mandate some particular socioeconomic outcome; and not merely because charity and widespread material well-being are worth pursuing for their own sake (which they may be). Rather, the point is that there may be a significant causal relationship between economic outcomes and the material prospects for sustaining a free society.

Even a totally free society in which large numbers of people are desperately poor is likely to be in great danger of collapsing into civil war. A totally free society in which a small class of tycoons owns 99 percent of the property and the vast majority of the population own almost nothing is unlikely to remain free for long if the tycoons should decide to use their wealth to purchase coercive legal privileges against the unpropertied majority — simply because they have a lot of resources to attack with and the majority hasn't got the material resources to defend themselves.

Now, to the extent that persistent, severe poverty, and large-scale inequalities of wealth are almost always the result of government intervention, it's unlikely that totally free societies would face such dire situations. Over time, many if not most of these problems would likely sort themselves out spontaneously through free-market processes, even without conscious anti-poverty activism.

But problems of poverty or economic inequality are still likely to be extremely pressing for societies like ours, which are not currently free, but which libertarians hope to help become free. Certainly in our unfree market there are widespread poverty and large-scale inequalities of wealth, most of it created by the heavy hand of government intervention in the form of direct subsidies and the creation of rigged or captive markets. Those who now enjoy the fruit of those privileges will continue to exercise some of the tremendous advantage they enjoy in material resources and political pull to pressure government into perpetuating or expanding the interventions from which they benefit. Since libertarians aim to abolish those interventions, it may well make good strategic sense for them to support voluntary, nongovernmental efforts that work to undermine or bypass consolidated political-economic power. Otherwise we will find ourselves trying to fight with slingshots while freedom's enemies fire back with bazookas.

Thickness from Consequences — The Effects of Liberty

Finally, there may be social practices or outcomes that libertarians should (in some sense) be committed to opposing, even though they are not themselves coercive, because 1) government coercion is a precondition for them and 2) there are independent reasons for regarding them as social evils. If aggression is morally illegitimate, then libertarians are entitled not only to condemn it, but also to condemn the destructive results that flow from it — even if those results are, in some important sense, external to the actual coercion.

Thus, for example, left-libertarians such as Kevin Carson and Matt MacKenzie have argued forcefully for libertarian criticism of certain business practices — such as low-wage sweatshop labor — as exploitative. Throughout the twentieth century most libertarians rushed to the defense of such practices on the grounds that they result from market processes and are often the best economic options for extremely poor people in developing countries. The state-socialist solution of expansive government regulation of wages and conditions would, it is argued, distort the market, violate the rights of workers and bosses to freely negotiate the terms of labor, and harm the very workers that the regulators professed to help.

The problem with trying to use free market economic principles in the defense of such labor practices is that those practices arose in markets that are far from being free. In Carson's and MacKenzie's view, while twentieth-century libertarians were right to claim that existing modes of production should not be even further distorted by expanded government regimentation, too many believed that those modes would be the natural outcome of an undistorted market. Against

these confusions, Carson and MacKenzie have revived an argument drawn from the tradition of nineteenth-century free-market individualist anarchists like Benjamin Tucker, who maintained that prevailing government privileges for business — monopoly, regulatory cartelization of banking, manipulation of the currency, legal restrictions and military violence against union strikers, politicized distribution of land to connected speculators and developers, and more — distorted markets in such a way as to systematically push workers into precarious and impoverishing economic arrangements and to force them, against the backdrop of the unfree market in land and capital, to make ends meet by entering a “free” job market on the bosses’ terms.

On Tucker’s view, as on Carson’s and MacKenzie’s, this sort of systemic concentration of wealth and “market” power can only persist as long as the government intervenes to sustain it. Free-market competition would free workers to better their own lives outside traditional corporate channels and would allow entrepreneurs to tear down top-heavy corporate behemoths through vigorous competition for land, labor, and capital.

Thus to the extent that sweatshop conditions and starvation wages are sustained, and alternative arrangements like workers’ co-ops suppressed, through dramatic restrictions on property rights throughout the developing world — restrictions exploited by opportunistic corporations that often collaborate with authoritarian governments — libertarians, as libertarians, have good reasons to condemn the social evils that arise from these labor practices. Thus libertarians should support voluntary, state-free forms of solidarity — such as private “fair trade” certification, wild-cat unionism, or mutual-aid societies — that work to undermine exploitative practices and build a new society within the shell of the old. There is every reason to believe that in a truly free market the conditions of ordinary laborers, even those who are very poor, would be quite different and much better.

I should make it clear, if it is not yet clear, that I have not attempted to provide a detailed justification for the specific claims I have made on behalf of “thick” commitments. Just which social and cultural projects libertarians, as libertarians, should incorporate into theory and practice remains to be hashed out in a detailed debate.

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