Myth and Truth About Libertarianism

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Libertarianism is the fastest growing political creed in America today. Before judging and evaluating libertarianism, it is vitally important to find out precisely what that doctrine is, and, more particularly, what it is not. It is especially important to clear up a number of misconceptions about libertarianism that are held by most people, and particularly by conservatives. In this essay I shall enumerate and critically analyze the most common myths that are held about libertarianism. When these are cleared away, people will then be able to discuss libertarianism free of egregious myths and misconceptions, and to deal with it as it should be on its very own merits or demerits.

MYTH #1: *LIBERTARIANS BELIEVE THAT EACH INDIVIDUAL IS AN ISOLATED, HERMETICALLY SEALED ATOM, ACTING IN A VACUUM WITHOUT INFLUENCING EACH OTHER.*

This is a common charge, but a highly puzzling one. In a lifetime of reading libertarian and classical liberal literature, I have not come across a single theorist or writer who holds anything like this position.

The only possible exception is the fanatical Max Stirner, a mid-19th-century German individualist who, however, has had minimal influence upon libertarianism in his time and since. Moreover, Stirner’s explicit “Might Makes Right” philosophy and his repudiation of all moral principles including individual rights as “spooks in the head,” scarcely qualifies him as a libertarian in any sense. Apart from Stirner, however, there is no body of opinion even remotely resembling this common indictment.

Libertarians are methodological and political individualists, to be sure. They believe that only individuals think, value, act, and choose. They believe that each individual has the right to own his own body, free of coercive interference. But no individualist denies that people are influencing each other all the time in their goals, values, pursuits and occupations.

As F.A. Hayek pointed out in his notable article, “The Non-Sequitur of the ‘Dependence Effect,’”John Kenneth Galbraith’s assault upon free-market economics in his best-selling *The Affluent Society* rested on this proposition: economics assumes that every individual arrives at his scale of values totally on his own, without being subject to influence by anyone else. On the contrary, as Hayek replied, everyone knows that most people do not originate their own values, but are influenced to adopt them by other people.[1]

No individualist or libertarian denies that people influence each other all the time, and surely there is nothing wrong with this inevitable process. What libertarians are opposed to is not voluntary

persuasion, but the coercive imposition of values by the use of force and police power. Libertarians are in no way opposed to the voluntary cooperation and collaboration between individuals: only to the compulsory pseudo-"cooperation" imposed by the state.

MYTH #2: *LIBERTARIANS ARE LIBERTINES: THEY ARE HEDONISTS WHO HANKER AFTER "ALTERNATIVE LIFESTYLES."*

This myth has recently been propounded by Irving Kristol, who identifies the libertarian ethic with the "hedonistic" and asserts that libertarians "worship the Sears Roebuck catalogue and all the 'alternative life styles' that capitalist affluence permits the individual to choose from."[2]

The fact is that libertarianism is not and does not pretend to be a complete moral or aesthetic theory; it is only a *political* theory, that is, the important subset of moral theory that deals with the proper role of violence in social life.

Political theory deals with what is proper or improper for government to do, and government is distinguished from every other group in society as being the institution of organized violence. Libertarianism holds that the *only* proper role of violence is to defend person and property *against* violence, that any use of violence that goes beyond such just defense is itself aggressive, unjust, and criminal. Libertarianism, therefore, is a theory which states that everyone should be free of violent invasion, should be free to do as he sees fit, except invade the person or property of another. What a person *does* with his or her life is vital and important, but is simply irrelevant to libertarianism.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that there are libertarians who are indeed hedonists and devotees of alternative lifestyles, and that there are also libertarians who are firm adherents of "bourgeois" conventional or religious morality. There are libertarian libertines and there are libertarians who cleave firmly to the disciplines of natural or religious law. There are other libertarians who have no moral theory at all apart from the imperative of non-violation of rights. That is because libertarianism *per se* has no general or personal moral theory.

Libertarianism does not offer a way of life; it offers liberty, so that each person is free to adopt and act upon his own values and moral principles. Libertarians agree with Lord Acton that "liberty is the highest political end" — not necessarily the highest end on everyone's personal scale of values.

There is no question about the fact, however, that the subset of libertarians who are free-market economists tends to be delighted when the free market leads to a wider range of choices for consumers, and thereby raises their standard of living. Unquestionably, the idea that prosperity is better than grinding poverty is a moral proposition, and it ventures into the realm of general moral theory, but it is still not a proposition for which I should wish to apologize.

MYTH #3: *LIBERTARIANS DO NOT BELIEVE IN MORAL PRINCIPLES; THEY LIMIT THEMSELVES TO COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS ON THE ASSUMPTION THAT MAN IS ALWAYS RATIONAL.*

This myth is of course related to the preceding charge of hedonism, and some of it can be answered in the same way. There are indeed libertarians, particularly Chicago-school economists, who refuse to believe that liberty and individual rights are moral principles, and instead attempt to arrive at public policy by weighing alleged social costs and benefits.

In the first place, most libertarians are "subjectivists" in economics, that is, they believe that the utilities and costs of different individuals cannot be added or measured. Hence, the very concept of social costs and benefits is illegitimate. But, more importantly, most libertarians rest their case on moral principles, on a belief in the natural rights of every individual to his person or property. They therefore believe in the absolute immorality of aggressive violence, of invasion of those rights to person or property, regardless of which person or group commits such violence.

Far from being immoral, libertarians simply apply a universal human ethic to *government* in the same way as almost everyone would apply such an ethic to every other person or institution in society. In particular, as I have noted earlier, libertarianism as a political philosophy dealing with

the proper role of violence takes the universal ethic that most of us hold toward violence and applies it fearlessly to government.

Libertarians make no exceptions to the golden rule and provide no moral loophole, no double standard, for government. That is, libertarians believe that murder is murder and does not become sanctified by reasons of state if committed by the government. We believe that theft is theft and does not become legitimated because organized robbers call their theft "taxation." We believe that enslavement is enslavement even if the institution committing that act calls it "conscription." In short, the key to libertarian theory is that it makes no exceptions in its universal ethic for government.

Hence, far from being indifferent or hostile to moral principles, libertarians fulfill them by being the only group willing to extend those principles across the board to government itself.[3]

It is true that libertarians would allow each individual to choose his values and to act upon them, and would in short accord every person the right to be either moral or immoral as he saw fit. Libertarianism is strongly opposed to enforcing any moral creed on any person or group by the use of violence — except, of course, the moral prohibition against aggressive violence itself. But we must realize that no action can be considered *virtuous* unless it is undertaken freely, by a person's voluntary consent.

As Frank Meyer pointed out:

"Men cannot be forced to be free, nor can they even be forced to be virtuous. To a certain extent, it is true, they can be forced to act as though they were virtuous. But virtue is the fruit of well-used freedom. And no act to the degree that it is coerced can partake of virtue — or of vice".[4]

If a person is forced by violence or the threat thereof to perform a certain action, then it can no longer be a moral choice on his part. The morality of an action can stem only from its being freely adopted; an action can scarcely be called moral if someone is compelled to perform it at gunpoint.

Compelling moral actions or outlawing immoral actions, therefore, cannot be said to foster the spread of morality or virtue. On the contrary, coercion atrophies morality for it takes away from the individual the freedom to be either moral or immoral, and therefore forcibly deprives people of the chance to be moral. Paradoxically, then, a compulsory morality robs us of the very opportunity to be moral.

It is furthermore particularly grotesque to place the guardianship of morality in the hands of the state apparatus — that is, none other than the organization of policemen, guards, and soldiers. Placing the state in charge of moral principles is equivalent to putting the proverbial fox in charge of the chicken coop.

Whatever else we may say about them, the wielders of organized violence in society have never been distinguished by their high moral tone or by the precision with which they uphold moral principle.

MYTH #4: *LIBERTARIANISM IS ATHEISTIC AND MATERIALIST, AND NEGLECTS THE SPIRITUAL SIDE OF LIFE.*

There is no necessary connection between being for or against libertarianism and one's position on religion. It is true that many if not most libertarians at the present time are atheists, but this correlates with the fact that most intellectuals, of most political persuasions, are atheists as well.

There are many libertarians who are theists, Jewish or Christian. Among the classical liberal forebears of modern libertarianism in a more religious age there were a myriad of Christians: from John Lilburne, Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson, and John Locke in the seventeenth century, down to Cobden and Bright, Frédéric Bastiat and the French laissez-faire liberals, and the great Lord Acton.

Libertarians believe that liberty is a natural right embedded in a natural law of what is proper for mankind, in accordance with man's nature. *Where* this set of natural laws comes from, whether it is

purely natural or originated by a creator, is an important ontological question but is irrelevant to social or political philosophy.

As Father Thomas Davitt declares: "If the word 'natural' means anything at all, it refers to the nature of a man, and when used with 'law,' 'natural' must refer to an ordering that is manifested in the inclinations of a man's nature and to nothing else. Hence, taken in itself, there is nothing religious or theological in the 'Natural Law' of Aquinas."[5]

Or, as D'Entrèves writes of the seventeenth century Dutch Protestant jurist Hugo Grotius:

"[Grotius's] definition of natural law has nothing revolutionary. When he maintains that natural law is that body of rule which Man is able to discover by the use of his reason, he does nothing but restate the Scholastic notion of a rational foundation of ethics. Indeed, his aim is rather to restore that notion which had been shaken by the extreme Augustinianism of certain Protestant currents of thought. When he declares that these rules are valid in themselves, independently of the fact that God willed them, he repeats an assertion which had already been made by some of the schoolmen…" [6]

Libertarianism has been accused of ignoring man's spiritual nature. But one can easily arrive at libertarianism from a religious or Christian position: emphasizing the importance of the individual, of his freedom of will, of natural rights and private property. Yet one can also arrive at all these self-same positions by a secular, natural-law approach, through a belief that man can arrive at a rational apprehension of the natural law.

Historically, furthermore, it is not at all clear that religion is a firmer footing than secular natural law for libertarian conclusions. As Karl Wittfogel reminded us in his *Oriental Despotism*, the union of throne and altar has been used for centuries to fasten a reign of despotism on society.[7]

Historically, the union of church and state has been in many instances a mutually reinforcing coalition for tyranny. The state used the church to sanctify and preach obedience to its supposedly divinely sanctioned rule; the church used the state to gain income and privilege.

The Anabaptists collectivized and tyrannized Münster in the name of the Christian religion.[8]

And, closer to our century, Christian socialism and the social gospel have played a major role in the drive toward statism, and the apologetic role of the Orthodox Church in Soviet Russia has been all too clear. Some Catholic bishops in Latin America have even proclaimed that the only route to the kingdom of heaven is through Marxism, and if I wished to be nasty, I could point out that the Reverend Jim Jones, in addition to being a Leninist, also proclaimed himself the reincarnation of Jesus.

Moreover, now that socialism has manifestly failed, politically and economically, socialists have fallen back on the "moral" and the "spiritual" as the final argument for their cause. Socialist Robert Heilbroner, in arguing that socialism will have to be coercive and will have to impose a "collective morality" upon the public, opines that: "Bourgeois culture is focused on the *material achievement* of the individual. Socialist culture must focus on his or her *moral or spiritual* achievement."

The intriguing point is that this position of Heilbroner's was hailed by the conservative religious writer for *National Review*, Dale Vree. He writes:

"Heilbroner is … saying what many contributors to *NR* have said over the last quarter-century: you can't have both freedom and virtue. Take note, traditionalists. Despite his dissonant terminology, Heilbroner is interested in the same thing you're interested in: virtue." [9]

Vree is also fascinated with the Heilbroner view that a socialist culture must "foster the primacy of the collectivity" rather than the "primacy of the individual." He quotes Heilbroner's contrasting "moral or spiritual" achievement under socialism as against bourgeois "material" achievement, and adds correctly: "There is a traditional ring to that statement."

Vree goes on to applaud Heilbroner's attack on capitalism because it has "no sense of 'the good'" and permits "consenting adults" to do anything they please. In contrast to this picture of freedom and permitted diversity, Vree writes that "Heilbroner says alluringly, because a socialist society must have a sense of 'the good,' not everything will be permitted." To Vree, it is impossible "to

have economic collectivism along with cultural individualism," and so he is inclined to lean toward a new "socialist-traditionalist fusionism" — toward collectivism across the board.

We may note here that socialism becomes especially despotic when it replaces "economic" or "material" incentives by allegedly "moral" or "spiritual" ones, when it affects to promoting an indefinable "quality of life" rather than economic prosperity.

When payment is adjusted to productivity there is considerably more freedom as well as higher standards of living. For when reliance is placed solely on altruistic devotion to the socialist motherland, the devotion has to be regularly reinforced by the knout. An increasing stress on individual material incentive means ineluctably a greater stress on private property and keeping what one earns, and brings with it considerably more personal freedom, as witness Yugoslavia in the last three decades in contrast to Soviet Russia.

The most horrifying despotism on the face of the earth in recent years was undoubtedly Pol Pot's Cambodia, in which "materialism" was so far obliterated that money was abolished by the regime. With money and private property abolished, each individual was totally dependent on handouts of rationed subsistence from the state, and life was a sheer hell. We should be careful before we sneer at "merely material" goals or incentives.

The charge of "materialism" directed against the free market ignores the fact that *every* human action whatsoever involves the transformation of material objects by the use of human energy and in accordance with ideas and purposes held by the actors. It is impermissible to separate the "mental" or "spiritual" from the "material."

All great works of art, great emanations of the human spirit, have had to employ material objects: whether they be canvasses, brushes and paint, paper and musical instruments, or building blocks and raw materials for churches. There is no real rift between the "spiritual" and the "material" and hence any despotism over and crippling of the material will cripple the spiritual as well.

MYTH #5: *LIBERTARIANS ARE UTOPIANS WHO BELIEVE THAT ALL PEOPLE ARE GOOD, AND THAT THEREFORE STATE CONTROL IS NOT NECESSARY.*

Conservatives tend to add that since human nature is either partially or wholly evil, strong state regulation is therefore necessary for society.

This is a very common belief about libertarians, yet it is difficult to know the source of this misconception. Rousseau, the *locus classicus* of the idea that man is good but is corrupted by his institutions, was scarcely a libertarian. Apart from the romantic writings of a few anarcho-communists, whom I would not consider libertarians in any case, I know of no libertarian or classical liberal writers who have held this view.

On the contrary, most libertarian writers hold that man is a mixture of good and evil and therefore that it is important for social institutions to encourage the good and discourage the bad. The state is the only social institution which is able to extract its income and wealth by coercion; all others must obtain revenue either by selling a product or service to customers or by receiving voluntary gifts. And the state is the only institution which can use the revenue from this organized theft to presume to control and regulate people's lives and property. Hence, the institution of the state establishes a socially legitimatized and sanctified channel for bad people to do bad things, to commit regularized theft and to wield dictatorial power.

Statism therefore encourages the bad, or at least the criminal elements of human nature. As Frank H. Knight trenchantly put it: "The probability of the people in power being individuals who would dislike the possession and exercise of power is on a level with the probability that an extremely tenderhearted person would get the job of whipping master in a slave plantation."[10]

A free society, by not establishing such a legitimated channel for theft and tyranny, discourages the criminal tendencies of human nature and encourages the peaceful and the voluntary. Liberty and the free market discourage aggression and compulsion, and encourage the harmony and mutual benefit of voluntary interpersonal exchanges, economic, social, and cultural.

Since a system of liberty would encourage the voluntary and discourage the criminal, and would remove the only legitimated channel for crime and aggression, we could expect that a free society would indeed suffer less from violent crime and aggression than we do now, though there is no warrant for assuming that they would disappear completely. That is not utopianism, but a common-sense implication of the change in what is considered socially legitimate, and in the reward-and-penalty structure in society.

We can approach our thesis from another angle. If all men were good and none had criminal tendencies, then there would indeed be no need for a state, as conservatives concede. But if on the other hand all men were evil, then the case for the state is just as shaky, since why should anyone assume that those men who form the government and obtain all the guns and the power to coerce others, should be magically exempt from the badness of all the other persons outside the government?

Tom Paine, a classical libertarian often considered to be naively optimistic about human nature, rebutted the conservative evil-human-nature argument for a strong state as follows: "If all human nature be corrupt, it is needless to strengthen the corruption by establishing a succession of kings, who be they ever so base, are still to be obeyed…" Paine added that "NO man since the fall hath ever been equal to the trust of being given power over all."[11]

And as the libertarian F.A. Harper once wrote:

"Still using the same principle that political rulership should be employed to the extent of the evil in man, we would then have a society in which complete political rulership of all the affairs of everybody would be called for…. One man would rule all. But who would serve as the dictator? However he were to be selected and affixed to the political throne, he would surely be a totally evil person, since all men are evil. And this society would then be ruled by a totally evil dictator possessed of total political power. And how, in the name of logic, could anything short of total evil be its consequence? How could it be better than having no political rulership at all in that society?" [12]

Finally, since, as we have seen, men are actually a mixture of good and evil, a regime of liberty serves to encourage the good and discourage the bad, at least in the sense that the voluntary and mutually beneficial are good and the criminal is bad. In no theory of human nature, then, whether it be goodness, badness, or a mixture of the two, can statism be justified.

In the course of denying the notion that he is a conservative, the classical liberal F.A. Hayek pointed out: "The main merit of individualism [which Adam Smith and his contemporaries advocated] is that it is a system under which bad men can do least harm. It is a social system which does not depend for its functioning on our finding good men for running it, or on all men becoming better than they now are, but which makes use of men in all their given variety and complexity…"[13]

It is important to note what differentiates libertarians from utopians in the pejorative sense. Libertarianism does not set out to remold human nature. One of socialism's major goals is to create, which in practice means by totalitarian methods, a New Socialist Man, an individual whose major goal will be to work diligently and altruistically for the collective.

Libertarianism is a political philosophy which says: Given any existent human nature, liberty is the only moral and the most effective political system.

Obviously, libertarianism — as well as any other social system — will work better the more individuals are peaceful and the less they are criminal or aggressive. And libertarians, along with most other people, would like to attain a world where more individuals are "good" and fewer are criminals. But this is not the doctrine of libertarianism *per se*, which says that *whatever* the mix of man's nature may be at any given time, liberty is best.

MYTH #6: *LIBERTARIANS BELIEVE THAT EVERY PERSON KNOWS HIS OWN INTERESTS BEST.*

Just as the preceding charge holds that libertarians believe all men to be perfectly good, so this myth charges them with believing that everyone is perfectly wise. Yet, it is then maintained, this is not true of many people, and therefore the state must intervene.

But the libertarian no more assumes perfect wisdom than he postulates perfect goodness. There is a certain common sense in holding that most men are better apprised of their own needs and goals than is anyone else. But there is no assumption that everyone always knows his own interest best. Libertarianism rather asserts that everyone should have the *right* to pursue his own interest as he deems best. What is being asserted is the right to act with one's own person and property, and not the necessary wisdom of such action.

It is also true, however, that the free market — in contrast to government — has built-in mechanisms to enable people to turn freely to experts who can give sound advice on how to pursue one's interests best. As we have seen earlier, free individuals are not hermetically sealed from one another. For on the free market, any individual, if in doubt about what his own true interests may be, is free to hire or consult experts to give him advice based on their possibly superior knowledge. The individual may hire such experts and, on the free market, can continuously test their soundness and helpfulness.

Individuals on the market, therefore, *tend* to patronize those experts whose advice will prove most successful. Good doctors, lawyers, or architects will reap rewards on the free market, while poor ones will tend to fare badly. But when government intervenes, the government expert acquires his revenue by compulsory levy upon the taxpayers. There is no market test of his success in advising people of their own true interests. He only need have ability in acquiring the political support of the state's machinery of coercion.

Thus, the privately hired expert will tend to flourish in proportion to his ability, whereas the government expert will flourish in proportion to his success in currying political favor. Moreover, the government expert will be no more virtuous than the private one; his only superiority will be in gaining the favor of those who wield political force. But a crucial difference between the two is that the privately hired expert has every pecuniary incentive to care about his clients or patients, and to do his best by them. But the government expert has no such incentive; he obtains his revenue in any case. Hence, the individual consumer will tend to fare better on the free market.

CONCLUSION

I hope that this essay has contributed to clearing away the rubble of myth and misconception about libertarianism. Conservatives and everyone else should politely be put on notice that libertarians do *not* believe that everyone is good, nor that everyone is an all-wise expert on his own interest, nor that every individual is an isolated and hermetically sealed atom. Libertarians are not necessarily libertines or hedonists, nor are they necessarily atheists; and libertarians emphatically *do* believe in moral principles.

Let each of us now proceed to an examination of libertarianism as it really is, unencumbered by myth or legend. Let us look at liberty plain, without fear or favor. I am confident that, were this to be done, libertarianism would enjoy an impressive rise in the number of its followers.

Notes

[1] John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958); F.A. Hayek, "The Non-Sequitur of the 'Dependence Effect,'" *Southern Economic Journal* (April, 1961), pp. 346–48.

[2] Irving Kristol, "No Cheers for the Profit Motive," *Wall Street Journal* (Feb. 21, 1979).

[3] For a call for applying universal ethical standards to government, see Pitirim A. Sorokin and Walter A. Lunden, *Power and Morality: Who Shall Guard the Guardians?* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1959), pp. 16–30.

[4] Frank S. Meyer, *In Defense of Freedom: A Conservative Credo* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1962), p. 66.
[5] Thomas E. Davitt, S.J., "St. Thomas Aquinas and the Natural Law," in Arthur L. Harding, ed., *Origins of the Natural Law Tradition* (Dallas, Tex.: Southern Methodist University Press, 1954), p. 39.
[6] A.P. d'Entrèves, *Natural Law* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1951). pp. 51–52.
[7] Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), esp. pp. 87–100.
[8] On this and other totalitarian Christian sects, see Norman Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium* (Fairlawn, N.J.: Essential Books, 1957).
[9] Dale Vree, "Against Socialist Fusionism," *National Review* (December 8, 1978), p. 1547. Heilbroner's article was in *Dissent*, Summer 1978. For more on the Vree article, see Murray N. Rothbard, "Statism, Left, Right, and Center," *Libertarian Review* (January 1979), pp. 14–15.
[10] *Journal of Political Economy* (December 1938), p. 869. Quoted in Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Road* to *Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944), p. 152.
[11] "The Forester's Letters, III" (orig. in *Pennsylvania Journal*, Apr. 24, 1776), in *The Writings* of *Thomas Paine* (ed. M. D. Conway, New York: G. E Putnam's Sons, 1906), I, 149–150.
[12] F.A. Harper, "Try This On Your Friends," *Faith and Freedom* (January, 1955). p. 19.
[13] F.A. Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), reemphasized in the course of his "Why I am Not a Conservative," *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 529.