

What a Libertarian Is - and Is Not

by Sam Wells

A libertarian is a person - any person - who consistently advocates individual freedom and consistently opposes the initiation of the use of coercion by anyone upon the person or property of anyone else for any reason. (Coercion is here defined as any action taken by a human being against the will or without the permission of another human being with respect to his or her body or property. This includes murder, rape, kidnaping, assault, trespassing, burglary, robbery, arson and fraud.) Some libertarians (such as the late Robert LeFevre) not only oppose all forms of initiatory coercion, but also the use of retaliatory coercion (revenge or criminal justice). The vast majority of libertarians, however, maintain that physical force used in self-defense or defense of one's family or property is fully justifiable.

But, all libertarians, by definition, at least oppose the initiatory use of coercion. They support the rational principle of the individual human rights of life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness. This means that each individual has the right to keep what he earns for himself and his family, and this includes the right to use, trade, sell, give away, or dispose of his property as he sees fit. A person who violates the rights of others by initiating coercion, violence, or fraud against them forfeits his right to be left alone by government and may be arrested, charged, tried, and imprisoned, deported or executed if convicted (depending on the nature of his or her crimes). The basic, proper function of lawful government is therefore limited to protecting these rights of the peaceful individual from criminals and foreign aggression, and in not violating these rights itself, for if government is allowed to go beyond this legitimate function and itself initiates force in violation of the rights of peaceful citizens, it necessarily contradicts the only rational justification for its own existence by acting criminally itself.

Real libertarians take individual rights seriously - seriously enough to consistently uphold them against the initiation of the use of force by anyone (including government) for any reason. This means that government must be bound by the policy of "laissez faire" - which means that government has no business coercively interfering with the lives of peaceful (non-coercive) citizens in their private affairs and voluntary (market) relationships.

Libertarians may or may not approve of some of the things that some people may do in private or in voluntary relations, but whatever their own code of personal moral conduct is, they do not seek to ban any private or voluntary activities by the use of force, including the force of government action. To do so would be to violate the very principle of individual rights of person and property, and thereby undercut any rational argument in favor of freedom or defense of the free-market system. Those exception makers and outright coercive busy-bodies in our midst (referred to as "interventionists" or "statists" by libertarians) who *do* want to abandon *government by principle* and instead put Whim in charge of the use of legal coercion are the people who help set the stage for arbitrary and capricious governmental tyranny - leading in the direction of

totalitarian dictatorship.

Libertarians Are Not Classical (European) Conservatives

Libertarians are not "conservatives"; libertarians are radicals (principled advocates) for individual freedom and responsibility - and the pure free-market private-enterprise economic system which would result from a consistent application of that principle. A "conservative" on the other hand is one who wishes to preserve the status quo. The status quo in America today is the semi-socialist, semi-fascist mixed-economy welfare-state - a system inimical to personal freedom and responsibility. Libertarians do not support such a system, and oppose any and all measures to expand it while favoring the total repeal of interventionist laws and regulatory agencies.

Conservatives of the William F. Buckley or William Bennett variety are generally more concerned with imposing "order" than with allowing freedom. Although they often (and rightly) complain that government has got "too big" and too meddlesome in our lives, on some specific issues they themselves favor using the political power of government to legislate and enforce their view of morality upon the populace in "the national interest" or for the "social good." William Bennett, for example, opposes the legalization and/or decriminalization of the sale and use of heroin and cocaine, and he continues to support the no-win "War on Drugs" which is causing violence to escalate in our society. Libertarians, on the other hand, realize that "enforced morality" (in such personal matters) is a contradiction in terms; without freedom of choice there can be no moral responsibility or personal growth.

Libertarians also perceive that freedom brings about a more complex, dynamic and harmonious order in society (co-ordinated by the market price mechanism) than any static view of order imposed by central political planning and regulations of our non-coercive behaviors. Some conservatives occasionally seem to forget how miserably the government-planned societies under hard-core socialism have failed to fulfill their glorious promises. Outside of its legitimate functions of protecting people from criminal violence and foreign threats, government does nothing as well or as economically as a private-enterprise market economy based on private property rights with individual freedom of enterprise and exchange.

Libertarians are for individual freedom - and this includes the freedom of people to do some things that we and other people may disapprove of. A person should be free (from coercive interference) to do what he pleases with his own life and property, as long as he does not violate (through coercive interference) the same right of other peaceful persons to do what they want with their lives and properties. (The second clause is logically implied in the first.) Libertarians do not oppose non-coercive persuasion, educational efforts, private advertising campaigns, organized boycotts, or even social ostracism as means of trying to effect changes in the private behavior of others. (Many people have stopped smoking tobacco in recent years partly as a result of education and persuasion by friends and family members.) What libertarians do

oppose is the attempt by anyone (individuals or government officials) to impose their own views of "fairness" or personal morality on others through the initiation of the use of coercion, by either personal violence or political legislation and governmental action. This principled position sets libertarians apart from conservatives as well as other non-libertarians.

Libertarians Are Not Welfare-State "Liberals"

Libertarians are not to be confused with the so-called "civil libertarians" which typify the membership and leadership of the American Civil Liberties Union. It is true that the ACLU has come to the defense of freedom of speech for certain minorities (e.g., nazis, communists, and anarchists) and this is commendable - but the podium has often been at taxpayers' expense, which is a contradiction from the real libertarian perspective. Many "civil libertarians" believe that some people have a "right" to violate the rights of others; they claim there is a "right to a job" or a "right" to welfare payments or a "right" to "free education" or a "right" to free child care - all at the expense of the people (usually the taxpayers) who are forced to pay for these so-called "rights." Real libertarians are for true freedom, not "freedom" at the forced expense of others. The only obligation that true rights impose on the citizen is of a negative kind: *not* to interfere with the rights of other peaceful people - i.e., to *refrain from the initiation of the use of coercion*. This is the core principle of libertarianism and is sometimes called the 'Non-Aggression Axiom'.

Welfare-state "liberals" and "civil libertarians" speak of "rights" of people as members of specially privileged groups, such as "women's rights" or "gay rights" or "rights of the handicapped" or even so-called "animal rights"! Real libertarians know that there are only *individual* rights, not group rights. There is no such thing as "gay rights" or "black rights" or "white rights" or left-handed Martian rights. Government must not be used to dish out special privileges to any group for any reason, since government cannot give anyone anything unless it takes it away from others by force, thereby violating their rights. There can be no such thing as a "right" to violate the rights of others.

No doubt there are some well-intentioned ACLU members who do promote true civil liberties and uphold human rights; however, the ACLU has not come to the defense of the rights of school children whose freedom is being violated daily by compulsory attendance laws and the tyranny of Federally-ordered forced busing. Nor do I know of any case in which the ACLU has defended the constitutional rights of businessmen who are being harassed by OSHA agents and other bureaucrats, or hounded by such arbitrary and subjective laws as the antitrust acts. Indeed, many "civil libertarians" seem callously insensitive to the victims of crime and legal plunder - while they defend known criminals from justice.

Because of their consistent adherence to the principle of individual rights, libertarians are the only true defenders of liberty -- civil or otherwise. Real libertarians

understand that freedom of speech and other civil liberties depend on the sanctity of private property - not its violation by anti-discrimination laws and other forms of government intervention.

Libertarians Are Not for Unlimited Majority Rule

Libertarians are not democrats. While majority rule may or may not be as good as any other mechanism for selecting the men and women who administer the offices of government, libertarians deny that anyone or any group has a right to rule over other peaceful (non-coercive) citizens - whether they are in the majority or minority at any given time. If stealing is wrong for an individual to do, it is still wrong when conducted by a large group or by a majority vote. The number of people involved in an act does not change the rightness or wrongness of the act in that sense. There is no magic number that turns an individual wrong into a collective right. In a libertarian republic, the basic policy of government (i.e., laissez faire) is set by reference to fundamental principle -- the principle of individual rights -- and not determined by a show of hands. Libertarians uphold the right of the peaceful individual to self-ownership and private property against any who would violate this right - even a majority.

Libertarians Are Not Anarchists

Libertarians are not anarchists. While it is true that some individuals favor a political system of competing vigilante committees, and refer to this position as "anarcho-capitalism" (a view formerly held by libertarian economist Murray Rothbard), this is a confusing misnomer based on an apparent failure to clearly distinguish between the nature of market institutions (which do not involve the use of coercion at all, either initiatory or retaliatory) and the nature of coercive entities (criminal or legal). Actually, libertarianism rests on the concepts of individualism, self-ownership, private property, & voluntary (market) exchange. Classical anarchism not only opposed the political state, but also some voluntary organizations of which it disapproved. Most importantly, true anarchists opposed private property - without which no voluntary relationships are possible. Today's libertarians are in the classical liberal tradition of Algernon Sidney, John Locke, Adam Smith, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Edmund Burke, Herbert Spencer, and Frederic Bastiat - *not* the anarchist tradition of Proudhon, Kropotkin, and Bakunin. Virtually all the major thinkers and writers which inspired the libertarian cause -- Frederic Bastiat, Herbert Spencer, Auberon Herbert, Henry Hazlitt, F. A. Hayek, [Ludwig von Mises](#), Leonard Read, Ayn Rand, George Reisman -- whatever differences they may have had, they all supported the libertarian position of advocating a general policy of laissez faire be imposed on government -- and they all opposed anarchy and anarchism as antithetical to liberty.

Libertarians Are Not Pragmatists

Libertarians do not advocate freedom or the free-market economy merely because "it works" (which it does better than any other system); they support it as the only non-coercive and just system - the system in which people are free to deal with one another on a voluntary basis as traders (exchangers of goods and services) instead of as masters and slaves - or as privileged class and exploited host. Others advocate government by whim. Libertarians adhere to certain *principles*, and without the guidance of principles and standards, all that is left is pragmatic expediency and the tyranny of government by whim. One might say that libertarians are "idealists" in the popular sense of that word; after all, libertarians stand for certain *ideals* - goals to strive for (e.g., less government intervention, more individual freedom and moral responsibility, free markets, etc.). Because libertarianism is based on man's nature and the nature of reality, it is the most practicable social system. Libertarians are *practical* idealists.

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Future Paragraphs to be Written

Libertarians Are Not Populists

Libertarians Are Not "NeoConservatives"