

Libertarianism vs. Radical Capitalism

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Libertarianism, writes David Boaz, “is the view that each person has the right to live his life in any way he chooses so long as he respects the equal rights of others.”

Libertarians defend each person’s right to life, liberty, and property—rights that people possess naturally, before governments are created. In the libertarian view, all human relationships should be voluntary; the only actions that should be forbidden by law are those that involve the initiation of force against those who have not themselves used force—actions like murder, rape, robbery, kidnapping, and fraud.¹

Given such a description of libertarianism, I’m often asked: What’s not to like? How could any liberty-loving person oppose this?

Those are good questions. In answering them, let us proceed in the spirit of Frédéric Bastiat and take into account not only what is seen, but also what is not seen.

What is not seen here?

Crucial unseen elements include the libertarian positions on where rights come from, how we know it, and whether objective, demonstrably true answers to such questions are necessary or even possible in defense of liberty. What are the libertarian positions on such matters?

On examination of libertarian literature, we find that libertarians generally hold that rights are “self-evident,” or “God-given,” or somehow (yet inexplicably) “natural.”² Many libertarians hold that rights are corollaries of “self-ownership” or of the idea that the individual’s life belongs to him, which they take to be an “axiom,” a self-evident truth, or an irreducible primary.³ And many hold that the evil or impermissibility of initiatory force is an axiom, the so-called “nonaggression axiom.”⁴

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The essential unifying idea in this core of libertarian ideology is that the existence of rights and the propriety of liberty are either obvious, or matters of faith, or sufficiently explained by the word “natural”; accordingly, deeper moral or philosophic arguments in support of them are unnecessary. Why provide philosophic arguments for that which people can know by just opening their eyes, or closing their eyes, or waving their hands and saying “natural”?

The fact is that people do not and cannot know anything about the nature of rights or the propriety of liberty by such means. If we want to defend liberty successfully, we need to understand and be able to articulate, among other things, where rights come from, why we have them, and how we know it.

Although the American founders held that rights are self-evident, or God-given, or natural, and although they (thankfully) were able to establish America on this idea, the idea is false—and its falseness has become increasingly clear since the days of the founders as philosophies that reject the very possibility of rights have multiplied. We’ll turn to some of those philosophies shortly. But, first, let’s consider a few perceptual-level facts of the matter.

Observe that we cannot see, hear, touch, taste, or smell rights. Look around. Rights are nowhere to be seen or otherwise perceived. The only self-evident fact about rights is that rights are not self-evident.

Nor is there any evidence to support the idea that rights come from “God.” There’s no evidence that God exists, much less that rights somehow emanate from His will. Belief in God is a matter of faith—acceptance of ideas in support of which there is no evidence. (When a person accepts ideas based on evidence, he is going by reason, not faith.) Further, according to religious scripture, the Gods of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam explicitly command people to *violate* rights (more on this below). If people choose to believe in God, that is their personal business, and a civilized society respects and protects their right to practice the non-rights-violating aspects of their creeds. But claiming that rights come from God is not a sound strategy for defending rights or advocating liberty.

Nor is claiming that rights are “natural” a sound strategy. What does it mean for rights to be natural? Does it mean that rights exist “out there” somewhere in nature, like trees or planets or atoms? Again, look around. They don’t. Does it mean that rights exist somewhere inside of man, like bones or blood or lungs? If you cut someone open (and I’m not suggesting you do), you will not find rights anywhere inside him. Rights do not exist in nature or in man—at least not physically. Rights are not physical existents; they are *ideas*—specifically, they are highly abstract principles concerning man’s proper freedom of action in a social context.

Yes, rights *do* exist. But, like many things that exist—such as justice, honesty, sarcasm, and logic—rights are not perceivable. To understand the nature of rights, why they exist, why they are inalienable, how we know any of this, and what these principles mean in practice, we must turn to the underlying ideas that give rise to rights and that ground them in perceptual reality. Those ideas lie in morality and deeper philosophy.

Unfortunately, many advocates of liberty want to avoid morality and deeper philosophy. This is, to some extent, understandable, because when we turn to these fields today, we find that the dominant moralities and philosophies reject the possibility that rights exist.

For instance, one of the most widely accepted moral codes today, *utilitarianism*, holds that the standard of moral value is “the greatest happiness for the greatest number.”⁵ On this view, the idea that people have inalienable rights is, as utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham puts it, “nonsense upon stilts.”⁶ If the standard of morality is the greatest happiness for the greatest number, then the notion that an individual should be free to live his life (the right to *life*), according to his judgment (*liberty*), using the product of his effort (*property*), for his own purposes (*the pursuit of happiness*) is ridiculous. Suppose the greatest number say his doing so makes them unhappy. Or suppose a majority, such as white southerners, is happy to enslave a minority, such as imported black southerners. Or suppose a majority, such as non-Jewish Germans, is happy to exterminate a minority, such as Jewish Germans. Clearly, utilitarianism is incompatible with rights.

A related and even more widely accepted moral code, *altruism*, holds that the standard of morality is self-sacrificial service to others. According to altruism, explains altruist philosopher Auguste Comte, we have a “constant duty” (an unchosen obligation) “to live for others.” We must be “servants of Humanity, whose we are entirely”; therefore we must “eliminate the doctrine of rights. . . . The whole notion, then, must be completely put away.”⁷ If you have a moral duty to live for others, if you belong to and must serve Humanity, you clearly cannot have a moral right to live for yourself, or act on your judgment, or keep your property, or pursue your happiness.

And then there is the increasingly popular doctrine of *egalitarianism*, which holds—*not* that people should be treated equally before the law (that is a policy of laissez-faire capitalism)—but, rather, that the standard of morality is, as egalitarian philosopher John Rawls puts it, “equality of opportunity” for all members of society, with exceptions permitted only when they are “to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society.”⁸ Clearly, if that is the standard of morality,

then rights cannot exist—at least not for anyone but “the least-advantaged.” As Rawls explains, on this standard, “it is incorrect that individuals with greater natural endowments and the superior character that has made their development possible have a right to a cooperative scheme [i.e., a legal system] that enables them to obtain even further benefits in ways that do not contribute to the advantages of others.” On the egalitarian standard, Rawls continues, certain actions in the “social, economic, and technological” spheres must be forbidden. “No basic liberty is absolute”—not even “freedom of thought and liberty of conscience, or political liberty and the guarantees of the rule of law, is absolute.”¹⁰ And, “of course,” Rawls emphasizes, individuals do not have “the right to own certain kinds of property (e.g., means of production) and freedom of contract as understood by the doctrine of *laissez-faire*,” because “the distribution of wealth and income, and positions of authority and responsibility, are to be consistent with . . . equality of opportunity.”¹¹

Given the prevalence of utilitarianism, altruism, egalitarianism, and other rights-denying philosophies, it is understandable that some advocates of liberty are uncomfortable engaging in discussions about morality and deeper philosophy. But avoiding these ideas doesn’t make them go away. And people who have accepted these ideas are not going to be convinced that they are wrong merely by hearing claims that “rights are self-evident” or “rights come from God” or “rights come from nature (though I can’t say how)” or “there’s this nonaggression axiom.”

Utilitarian, altruist, and egalitarian philosophers have put forth *arguments* in support of their rights-denying philosophies, and many Americans have heard these arguments in some form and embraced them to some extent. This is largely why we are strapped with so many rights-violating laws and institutions today, from ObamaCare, to government-run schools, to antitrust laws, and everything in between. Granted, these philosophers’ arguments are flawed. But they *have* arguments, and people who have accepted the arguments are not going to be swayed by mere assertions that rights exist or that liberty is good.¹²

Where *do* rights come from? Why do we have them? How do we know it? These are moral and philosophic questions, and they require moral and philosophic answers. Far from being axioms or irreducible primaries or self-evident truths, rights are highly abstract *derivative* principles that arise from and depend on a moral and philosophic foundation of observations, integrations, principles, and logic.

Fortunately for lovers of liberty, the Objectivist philosopher Ayn Rand identified this conceptual hierarchy and showed how it is grounded in perceptual reality—facts we can see. For our purposes here, I’ll provide just a brief indication of the philosophic structure of her argument, beginning with the principle of individual

rights.¹³ (For Rand's full argument concerning the undergirding of rights, see her essays on the subject, especially those in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, or see my essay "Ayn Rand's Theory of Rights: The Moral Foundations of a Free Society.")¹⁴

What is the principle of individual rights? It is the recognition of the fact that each individual is an end in himself, not a means to the ends of others, and that each has a moral prerogative to act on his judgment for his own sake, free from coercion by others. He has a right to live his life as he sees fit (life), to act as he thinks best (liberty), to keep and use the product of his effort (property), and to pursue the goals and values of his choice (the pursuit of happiness). Correspondingly, no one, including groups and governments, has a moral right to force the individual to act against his judgment.

Immediately underlying and supporting the principle of individual rights is the principle that the initiation of physical force against a person is morally wrong and politically impermissible. It is morally wrong because, to the extent that force is used against a person, it stops him from acting on his rational judgment, which is his basic means of sustaining and furthering his life. (If someone points a gun at your head and tells you to shut up, or to hand over the product of your effort, or to "choose" a different career or lover or the like, then you cannot act on your judgment.) And initiatory force is politically impermissible because the proper purpose of a political system is to establish and maintain the social conditions that enable individuals to act on their judgment so that they can sustain and further their lives.

Why is that? What is so important about individuals using their judgment to sustain and further their lives? That is, as a matter of demonstrable fact, what each individual morally *should* do. We can see this by going still deeper into philosophy.

Underlying and supporting the principle of individual rights and the evil of initiatory force is the principle of *egoism*, the truth that each individual should act in his own self-interest by means of his own rational judgment and is the proper beneficiary of his own productive actions. Egoism holds that each individual should pursue his own life-serving values, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself, and that each should deal with others only on voluntary terms, by mutual consent to mutual advantage. Where did this principle come from? What makes it true? This principle is derived from still deeper principles—principles concerning the objective standard of moral value, and the very reason man needs values and morality in the first place.

The proper standard for determining whether an action or policy or institution is good or bad, right or wrong, is the factual requirements of the individual's life. Why? Because people are individuals—each with his own mind, his own body, his

own life—and because the only reason individuals need values or moral guidance is in order to live. If a person doesn't want to live, he doesn't need values or guidance at all; he can simply stop acting and he will soon die. Only a person's choice to live makes values possible (to him) and necessary (for him). He can't pursue values unless he's alive, and he doesn't need to pursue values unless he wants to live. Objective morality is ultimately grounded in, derived from, and, indeed, an expression of the factual requirements of the individual's life.

How can we be sure such ideas are true? We can arrive at true conclusions or check ideas for accuracy by looking at reality and using reason, our means of knowledge. Reason operates by means of observation, conceptual integration, and the principle of noncontradiction. If and when our ideas correspond to perceptual reality (facts we can see, touch, etc.), then our ideas are true. If we detect that our ideas contradict perceptual reality or previously proven fact, then we need to check and correct our thinking.

Underlying and supporting the above ideas are the laws of identity and causality—the genuinely self-evident truths that things are what they are and can act only in accordance with their natures. A person is a person; he's not a barnacle, or a lily, or a god. He can gain knowledge and live by looking at reality, thinking, and acting rationally; he cannot gain knowledge or live by refusing to look, refusing to think, or wishing or praying for goods to appear magically. If a person refuses to think and act rationally, he will soon die (unless others permit him to live parasitically on their rational efforts). We grasp these and all such truths by opening our eyes, looking at reality, and thinking.

There is a great deal more to the philosophic hierarchy undergirding rights, but the foregoing is an indication of the *kinds* of truths that cannot be ignored or denied if we are to defend individual rights and thus a free society. To ignore or deny the need of this foundation is to be at the mercy of utilitarians, altruists, egalitarians, and the like. Individual rights and the propriety of liberty *depend* on deeper moral and philosophic truths; thus, in order to defend liberty, we must recognize and embrace these deeper truths.

But libertarianism rejects the need to do so.

Libertarians avowedly don't want to engage in such controversies and complexities. They want to have and use the principle of rights while ignoring or denying the foundations on which it depends. As Susan Lee writes in praise of the ideology: "Libertarianism is simplicity itself. It proceeds from a single, quite beautiful, concept of the primacy of individual liberty." Libertarians "are not comfortable with 'normative questions' or 'questions of 'best behavior' in

social or cultural matters.” Rather, “Libertarian thought promotes relativism and inclusiveness” and a “tolerance” that “comes from indifference to moral questions.”¹⁵

Libertarianism is an effort to establish a big tent under which everyone who advocates “rights” or the “nonaggression axiom” can gather and get along and fight for “liberty”—regardless of any moral or philosophic differences they may have. As Alexander McCobin, executive director of Students for Liberty, explains, “libertarianism is a political philosophy that prioritizes the principle of liberty”:

[Y]ou can be a libertarian and be a Hindu, a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, a Buddhist, a Deist, an agnostic, an atheist, or a follower of any other religion, so long as you respect the equal rights of others. . . . Libertarianism is not a philosophy of life . . . or metaphysics or religion . . . or value, though it’s certainly compatible with an infinite variety of such philosophies.¹⁶

McCobin is correct. You *can* be a libertarian regardless of any deeper philosophic ideas you might have. Libertarianism is precisely a big-tent ideology that is not concerned with deeper moral or philosophic issues. But this is not a favorable feature of libertarianism; it is a fatal flaw.

People cannot credibly, coherently, or effectively defend liberty if their more fundamental moral and philosophic ideas are in conflict with rights. And the fundamental tenets of most people’s philosophies and religions flatly contradict the idea that rights should be respected—or that they even exist. We saw this above with respect to some secular philosophies. Consider now the clash between rights and religion.

Let’s start with an obvious example that is highly relevant in our post-9/11 world. According to Islam, Allah commands Muslims to convert or kill non-Muslims: “Fight and kill the disbelievers wherever you find them, take them captive, harass them, lie in wait and ambush them using every stratagem of war” (Koran 9:5); “Fight them until all opposition ends and all submit to Allah” (8:39). And so on. If people believe, as Muslims do, that God exists and that He commands them to convert or kill nonbelievers, how can they be expected to respect people’s rights? According to religion, God is not just some guy with an opinion. He’s God. He’s the ruler of the universe. He must be obeyed.

And Islam is not the only religion that calls for such aggression. Judaism and Christianity do, too. According to the Old Testament, God commands: “If your brother, the son of your mother, or your son, or your daughter, or the wife of your bosom, or your friend who is as your own soul, entices you secretly, saying, ‘Let us go and serve other gods’ . . . you shall not yield to him or listen to him, nor shall

your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him, nor shall you conceal him; but you shall kill him” (Deuteronomy 13:6–9). And: “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death” (Leviticus 20:13).

Although the New Testament is less overtly violent than the Old, it does include parables and metaphors in which Jesus arguably implies that his followers are to kill unbelievers. For instance, in the Parable of the Pounds, Jesus tells a story about a man who was to be king and who, after becoming king, calls for his subjects to round up those who opposed his reign and kill them: “As for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them before me” (Luke 19:27). Similarly, following the Last Supper, Jesus relayed the following metaphor to his disciples:

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. (John 15:5–6)

Regardless of whether a given Christian interprets such passages as incitements to kill unbelievers, many Christians over the centuries have interpreted them that way, which is (in part) why Christians have killed so many people who refused to accept Christ as their Savior.

Fortunately, few Jews or Christians take such aspects of their religions seriously today. But some do. And *many* take such aspects seriously enough that they call for government to post the Ten Commandments in courtrooms (“I am the Lord your God . . . You shall have no other gods before me . . .”), or to outlaw homosexuality, or to establish or maintain laws forbidding homosexuals to marry, or the like.

And the rights violations mandated or condoned by religion extend much further into culture and politics than that. Consider some biblical commandments pertaining specifically to property.

Judaism and Christianity hold that we are our brother’s keeper and that we have a moral duty to redistribute wealth to the poor. Both the Old and the New Testaments are clear on this. For instance, God (through Moses) says, “I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land” (Deuteronomy 15:11). And Jesus says, “Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back” (Luke 6:30); and “Sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor” (Luke 18:22). And so on.

If people believe, as Jews and Christians do, that God exists and that He commands people to redistribute their wealth to the needy, how can they be expected to accept the idea that they must respect property rights?

To say to a religious person, “You can be for liberty and still embrace your religion so long as you respect people’s rights” is to say, “You can be for liberty and still embrace your religion so long as you ignore or deny the central tenets of your religion.” Who is going to do that in any consistent or sustained way? And if a religious person were consistently to ignore the central tenets of his religion, how would he feel about himself? And what might he expect “God” to do about such disobedience?

If people accept fundamental moral or philosophic ideas that are in conflict with rights, then even if they *say* they are “for liberty,” they will not be able to support liberty in a consistent or lasting way. When it comes time to vote for a politician, or write to a representative, or advocate the abolition of Medicare or Medicaid or Social Security or food stamp programs or government-run schools, people’s fundamental philosophic convictions will substantially, if not entirely, trump their conflicting political claims.

The propriety of liberty and the evil of force presuppose and depend on certain moral and philosophic principles—and are undermined and contradicted by others. The only way to defend liberty is to identify, embrace, and uphold the objective, demonstrably true, moral and philosophic principles that support it—which is precisely the approach libertarianism opposes.

Granted, some libertarians say they are not against philosophic foundations as such, but only against the idea that there is one factually correct philosophic foundation for rights and liberty. On this view, a multitude of foundations can support liberty—and the more the merrier. As Tom G. Palmer puts it, “If many different non-exclusive arguments [about the source of rights] all converge on the same conclusion, we can be more sure of its truth than if only one of those arguments led us there, and the others led to other conclusions.”¹⁷ That sounds great, until you realize that the “many different non-exclusive arguments” alleged to converge on the conclusion that individuals’ have rights emerge from the very rights-denying philosophies we’ve been discussing: utilitarianism, egalitarianism, religion, and the like. Palmer himself names arguments from utilitarianism and religion among the “many,” and so-called bleeding-heart libertarians argue from altruism and egalitarianism in “defense” of liberty. All such arguments are welcome in this camp—so long as none claims itself correct to the exclusion of others. This, of course, is preposterous.

Other libertarians, sensing the impossibility of supporting rights with philosophies that explicitly deny the possibility of rights, simply avoid questions of moral truth and deeper philosophy altogether. For instance, when asked whether there are objective truths about right and wrong, or whether such “truths” are just matters of social consensus, Harry Brown (two-time nominee of the Libertarian Party) replied: “It’s a pretend game for us to discuss what is morally right and wrong. . . . [Libertarians] want to minimize the use of force in solving social and political problems . . . and we’re not going to solve them by discussing philosophy.”¹⁸

The truth, however, is that the *only* way we’re going to advance toward a free society is by discussing philosophy.

What people have and haven’t a right to do cannot be understood, much less defended, without engaging in philosophy. Those who do not ground the principle of rights and the propriety of liberty in deeper moral and philosophic truths do not actually know what rights are or why liberty is good, thus they cannot apply such principles consistently or rationally. Observe, in this regard, some of the views among libertarians concerning who has a “right” to do what.

Some libertarians, such as Murray Rothbard, hold that parents should be legally free to starve their children to death by withholding food from them—so long as the parents don’t aggress against anyone. Why would anyone take such a position? Because this position is implied by the so-called nonaggression axiom. “The fundamental axiom of libertarian theory,” explains Rothbard, is that “no violence may be employed against a nonaggressor. Here is the fundamental rule from which can be deduced the entire *corpus* of libertarian theory.”¹⁹ Hence, the argument goes, if the parents are not aggressing against anyone, then there are no grounds for legally forbidding them from withholding food from their children and letting them starve to death. As Rothbard puts it:

[T]he parent should not have a *legal obligation* to feed, clothe, or educate his children, since such obligations would entail positive acts coerced upon the parent and depriving the parent of his rights. . . . [T]he parent should have the legal right *not* to feed the child, i.e. to allow it to die. . . . This rule allows us to solve such vexing questions as: should a parent have the right to allow a deformed baby to die (e.g. by not feeding it)? The answer is of course yes, following *a fortiori* from the larger right to allow *any* baby, whether deformed or not, to die.²⁰

This is the kind of “thinking” that results from severing the principle of rights and the propriety of freedom from the moral and philosophic ideas that support and give rise to them. Ignored here are (among many things) the purpose of rights, the relationship of rights and responsibilities, the nature of parents, the

nature of children, and the nature of the parent-child relationship. These are not political matters. They are moral, epistemological, and metaphysical matters. And we cannot understand the proper legal responsibilities of parents to their children unless we understand and refer to these deeper philosophic issues.

Take another example. Some libertarians, such as Bryan Caplan, hold that we should never engage in war. Never. Not under any circumstances. Not even if we are attacked by an Islamic state that aims to kill all of us. Why? Because, says Caplan, war invariably involves “killing many innocent civilians”²¹ or at least “reckless endangerment of large numbers of innocent bystanders,”²² which, according to the nonaggression axiom, makes it ipso facto wrong. “The foreign policy that follows from libertarian principles,” writes Caplan, is “opposition to all warfare. And what is the name for ‘opposition to all warfare’? Pacifism.”

But doesn't pacifism contradict the libertarian principle that people have a right to use retaliatory force? No. I'm all for revenge against individual criminals. My claim is that in practice, it is nearly impossible to wage war justly, i.e., without trampling on the rights of the innocent. Every viable military organization in history has used force to acquire resources, recklessly endangered civilian lives, and embraced some variant on collective guilt. War is a dirty business. It's just too hard to win if you play fair.²³

On this “logic,” because we can't eliminate foreign regimes that attack us without killing innocent people in the process, we have no right to eliminate the aggressor regimes. Again, this is the kind of “thinking” that comes from severing the principle of rights and the evil of force from the moral and philosophic foundations that underlie and give rise to these principles. Ignored here are (among many things) the moral purpose of government, the egoistic nature of rights, and the nature of moral responsibility—including the principle that people and governments are responsible for the consequences of actions and events they necessitate. When these and related moral and philosophic truths are taken into account, we can see that a moral government is concerned with protecting the rights of its citizens, no matter what is required to do so, and that the moral responsibility for the deaths of all innocents in war lies with those who initiated force and thus necessitated retaliatory measures. We can see that, although the government retaliating may be the *proximate* cause of the deaths of innocents, the government or regime that initiated force and thus necessitated retaliatory force is the *fundamental* cause of those deaths. And we can see that, although the government using retaliatory force may not kill innocents beyond what is necessary to eliminate the aggressor, it may kill innocents if and to the extent that doing so is necessary to eliminate the aggressor. In short, if we take into account deeper moral and philosophic

principles, we can see how to navigate a highly complex and horrible situation; if we don't, we cannot.

As a final example of what happens when deeper philosophic truths are ignored, observe that many libertarians—including Murray Rothbard, Bryan Caplan, Roy Childs, Randy Barnett, Peter Leeson, Walter Block, and David Friedman—embrace *anarchism*, the idea that all government should be eliminated. On this view, government, by its nature, is unacceptable because, by establishing and enforcing laws in a given geographic area, government “aggresses” against those in the area who don't want to obey those laws. Government, according to anarchism, must be abolished so that people are “free”—free not only to produce and trade, but also to form their own “private defense agencies” or “competing defense agencies.” In the absence of government, the argument goes, these competing defense agencies would render society peaceful.²⁴

This idea, and every variant of it, ignores so many moral and philosophic truths that it's hard to know where to begin. It ignores the fact that a free market presupposes the existence of a government that bans initiatory force from social relationships and uses force only in retaliation and only against those who initiate its use. (If initiatory force is not banned by a government, then people and property are at the mercy of any thug or gang that decides to use force.) It ignores many facts about human nature, including the fact that without assurance that they can keep and use the product of their effort, people lose incentive to produce; and the fact that if people must constantly worry about whether they will be attacked by a thug or a group or a competing defense agency, they cannot focus on being productive or on pursuing other life-serving values—whether romantic relationships or recreational activities or a vacation or a meal. It ignores the fact that competing defense agencies would necessarily be based on competing ideas about what is and isn't the true source of proper rules or “laws” (the Bible? the Koran? social consensus? Mugsy's wish?), what is and isn't permissible (property? abortion? pedophilia? free speech?), what kind and degree of force should be used against those who violate the laws of the clan (stoning? amputation? revenge on family members?), what to do when someone from clan A does something impermissible according to the laws of clan B (kidnap him? invade and conquer his clan? kill them all? forget about it?), and on and on.

Most fundamentally, though, anarchism ignores the laws of identity and noncontradiction—the genuinely axiomatic facts that things are what they are and cannot be what they are not. Anarchism pretends, for instance, that many small governments are somehow not governments at all. The great 19th-century

classical liberal Auberon Herbert addresses this and related points definitively. “Anarchy,” explains Herbert, “seems to us not to understand itself”:

It is not in reality anarchy or “no government.” When it destroys the central and regularly constituted government, and proposes to leave every group to make its own arrangements for the repression of ordinary crime, it merely decentralizes government to the furthest point, splintering it up into minute fragments of all sizes and shapes. As long as there is ordinary crime, as long as there are aggressions by one man upon the life and property of another man, and as long as the mass of men are resolved to defend life and property, there cannot be anarchy or no government.

By the necessity of things, we are obliged to choose between regularly constituted government, generally accepted by all citizens for the protection of the individual, and irregularly constituted government, irregularly accepted, and taking its shape just according to the pattern of each group. Neither in the one case nor in the other case is government got rid of. The more true anarchist, the man who actually gets rid of government, is Tolstoy, who preaches as Christ did, that we should bear all injuries without returning them. In that way, it is true, government can be got rid of—but then how many of us are prepared to follow Tolstoy?

There still remains, as anarchists might urge, another method of dealing with ordinary crimes. Under the theory of “no government,” the defense of person and property, and the punishment of crime might be left absolutely to the individual; and this method, like Tolstoy’s method, would be quite consistent with the true anarchistic theory. I have heard an able anarchist defend it on the ground that men would exercise force with more scrupulousness, when obliged to act in their own persons, than when acting through a judge and policeman. But here again how many of us on the one hand are prepared to judge and to act for ourselves as regards our own wrongs; or on the other hand to consent to the self-made appointment of those—who believe themselves to be injured by us—as our judges and executioners? To most of us such a system could be described only by the word—pandemonium.²⁵

Herbert’s reasoning here is unassailably sound. But it will not persuade those who refuse to consider anything more fundamental than a so-called nonaggression axiom.

Observe that Herbert’s point is essentially metaphysical and epistemological. It involves the law of identity: Things are what they are—decentralized government is decentralized *government*. It involves the nature of man: As long as people choose to defend their lives and property (as they must in order to live), they *will* form governments to do so; thus there cannot be “no government,” at least not for long. And it involves the law of noncontradiction: Nothing can be both what it is and what it is not—government cannot be nongovernment, and pandemonium cannot be peace.

The foregoing are only a few problems with libertarianism; there are many more. But these few should suffice to make the point that advocacy of liberty detached from the *foundations* of liberty is thoroughgoing absurdity.

Of course, not all people who call themselves libertarians want to legalize the starvation of children or to refrain from national defense or to institute gang rule or the like. But nothing in the ideology of libertarianism stands opposed to such positions—because the principles that oppose such positions lie in deeper morality and philosophy. To understand what is wrong with such positions, we must *engage* in philosophy.

Now, some libertarians seek to defend liberty solely by educating people about economics and politics—by explaining how markets work, how “spontaneous order” emerges when individuals and businesses are free, and how a legal system that bans force enables all of this to happen. This is the mission of organizations such as the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE), the Cato Institute, and the Competitive Enterprise Institute. To be sure, explanations of the economic practicality of free markets and of the requisite political order established by the rule of law are important in advocating and defending liberty. But severed from the moral and philosophic foundation that underlies and supports rights and liberty, economic and political arguments for freedom fall flat.

Regardless of whether people believe that liberty is economically practical, if they maintain that it is morally unacceptable—which they do if they accept utilitarianism, altruism, egalitarianism, religion, or the like—then they will not be able to champion liberty effectively. Economists and political scientists have been teaching people about the practicality of free markets and the rule of law for decades on end, showing how these conditions enable people to pursue their goals and improve their lives. Yet few people today support a genuinely free society. Why? The reason is that people’s deeper moral and philosophic principles ultimately trump their economic and political beliefs. As Ayn Rand wrote in a letter to Leonard Read while he was planning the launch of FEE, “People are not embracing collectivism because they have accepted bad economics. They are accepting bad economics because they have embraced collectivism.”

You cannot reverse cause and effect. And you cannot destroy the cause by fighting the effect. That is as futile as trying to eliminate the symptoms of a disease without attacking its germs.

Marxist (collectivist) economics have been blasted, refuted and discredited quite thoroughly. Capitalist (or individualist) economics have never been refuted. Yet people go right on accepting Marxism. If you look into the matter closely, you will

see that most people know in a vague, uneasy way, that Marxist economics are screwy. Yet this does not stop them from advocating the same Marxist economics. Why?

The reason is that economics have the same place in relation to the whole of a society's life as economic problems have in the life of a single individual. A man does not exist merely in order to earn a living; he earns a living in order to exist. His economic activities are the means to an end; the kind of life he wants to lead, the kind of purpose he wants to achieve with the money he earns determines what work he chooses to do and whether he chooses to work at all. A man completely devoid of purpose (whether it be ambition, career, family or anything) stops functioning in the economic sense. That is when he turns into a bum in the gutter. Economic activity per se has never been anybody's end or motive power. And don't think that any kind of law of self-preservation would work here—that a man would want to produce merely in order to eat. He won't. For self-preservation to assert itself, there must be some reason for the self to wish to be preserved. Whatever a man has accepted, consciously or unconsciously, through routine or through choice as the purpose of his life—that will determine his economic activity.

And the same holds true of society and of men's convictions about the proper economics of society. That which society accepts as its purpose and ideal (or to be exact, that which men think society should accept as its purpose and ideal) determines the kind of economics men will advocate and attempt to practice; since economics are only the means to an end.

When the social goal chosen is by its very nature impossible and unworkable (such as collectivism), it is useless to point out to people that the means they've chosen to achieve it are unworkable. Such means go with such a goal; there are no others. You cannot make men abandon the means until you have persuaded them to abandon the goal.

Now the choice of a personal purpose or of a social ideal is a matter of philosophy and moral theory. *That* is why, if one wishes to cure a dying world, one has to start with moral and philosophical principles. Nothing less will do.²⁶

Economic arguments apart from the moral and philosophic grounding for rights do not and cannot change people's minds in any substantial or lasting way. This is why—despite all the institutions dedicated to educating people about economics, and despite all the books and articles exhaustively explaining why and how free markets lead to general prosperity—we have suffered and continue to suffer an ever-expanding system of rights-violating laws, regulations, programs, and institutions: from antitrust laws, to government-run schools, to minimum wage laws, to Social Security, to food stamp programs, to Medicare and Medicaid, to Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, to Sarbanes-Oxley, Dodd-Frank, ObamaCare, and god knows what's next. We are saddled with such statist policies and institutions *not* because people's understanding of economics is insufficient, but because their

philosophic and/or religious views dictate that such policies and institutions are morally necessary—and that eliminating them, although perhaps economically prudent, would be morally abhorrent.

If we want to work toward a free society, it is not enough to *say* that we have “rights” or that aggression is “bad” or that free markets are “good.” Nor is it enough to explain why and how free markets work. If we want to advocate liberty successfully, we must understand and be able to explain where rights come from, why we have them, and how we know it. We must understand and be able to articulate what the concepts “good” and “bad” objectively mean—and how we know this. *We must engage in philosophy.*

Having approached this subject in the spirit of Frédéric Bastiat, having taken into account not only what is seen but also what is not seen in common descriptions of libertarianism, we can now see that the essence of libertarianism is the rejection of the need to embrace and discuss philosophy in defense of liberty. *This* is what’s not to like about libertarianism.

Whereas libertarianism holds that we need not discuss philosophy in defense of liberty, a different ideology holds that we *must* discuss it. The best term for this ideology is, paraphrasing Ayn Rand, “radical capitalism.”²⁷

Radical means “going to the root” or “going to fundamentals.” Capitalism is the social system based on the recognition of individual rights, in which government does only one thing: protects rights by banning physical force from social relationships, and by using force only in retaliation and only against those who initiate its use. The phrase “radical capitalism” includes or implies a number of essential aspects of a free society that libertarianism ignores or denies. Consider:

- Because radical means “going to the root,” radical capitalism implies the importance of fundamentals and the need to address questions such as: What are rights? Where do they come from? How do we know it? What is the standard of good and bad, right and wrong? How do we know *this*? What is our means of knowledge? How can we check our ideas for correspondence to reality?
- Because capitalism is the social system in which government protects rights, radical capitalism implies and embraces the *need* for government and thus opposes anarchism, the absurd notion that government should be abolished to make way for gang warfare.
- Because the purpose of government in a capitalist society is to protect the rights of individuals in its charge, radical capitalism rejects pacifism and so-called

“noninterventionism” and all other ideas that would preclude government from using whatever force is necessary to eliminate foreign aggressors. The government in a capitalist society is *required* to use whatever force is necessary to protect the rights of its citizens. Further, because the threat of force is a *form* of force—a fact lost on those who refuse to discuss philosophy—a rights-protecting government may use force as necessary even against those who have “merely” threatened its use. Further still, because deeper philosophy makes clear that all deaths in war—including deaths proximately caused by a state engaging in retaliatory force—are the moral responsibility of the state or regime that initiated force, radical capitalism unabashedly upholds the moral right of an attacked or threatened nation to use force against the aggressor even if innocents are (unfortunately) killed in the process.

There are additional benefits involved in using the phrase “radical capitalism” to denote the ideology anchored in the moral and philosophic foundations of liberty, but those few points provide an indication of how the idea stands in contrast to libertarianism.

Radical capitalism and libertarianism are not just different things. They are *essentially* different things. They are *radically* different things. One advocates and defends a free society by identifying and upholding the moral and philosophic ideas that underlie and support such a society; the other attempts to defend a free society by ignoring or denying those ideas (or the need of discussing them). One supports its political conclusions with a solid structure of integrated principles ultimately grounded in perceptual reality; the other asserts its political positions and uses concepts such as “liberty” and “rights” and “good” and “bad” while ignoring or denying more-fundamental ideas on which such derivative ideas logically depend. One is an example of the hierarchical nature of conceptual knowledge; the other is an example of the fallacy of *concept stealing*, which consists in using an idea or concept while ignoring or denying ideas on which it logically depends.²⁸

In light of this huge and fundamental difference, the fact that both radical capitalism and libertarianism purport to be “for liberty” is trivial. These ideologies are superficially similar yet *essentially* different. And because they *are* essentially different, we need different terms to denote them.

Although some libertarians insist on calling anyone who advocates liberty a “libertarian,” they are objectively wrong in doing so. Proper classification is a matter of the factual requirements of human cognition. The purpose of classification is to identify essentially similar things and to differentiate them from essentially different things so that when we think and talk, we know what we are thinking and

talking about. We *need* to distinguish the ideology that recognizes and upholds the fundamentals of liberty from the one that ignores or denies them. To conceptually package these two things together, to treat them as though they are essentially the same when in fact they are essentially different, is to commit the fallacy of *package dealing*, which consists in mentally mixing the logically unmixable.²⁹ The conceptual mishmash resulting from this package deal blurs crucial distinctions, throttles rational thinking, and wreaks havoc on efforts to defend liberty.

For instance, it blurs the distinction between those who advocate limiting government to the protection of rights and those who advocate *eliminating* government; this leads people to believe that the liberty movement aims ultimately to achieve anarchy, which, in turn, renders people uninterested in joining or supporting advocates of liberty. It blurs the distinction between those who advocate a foreign policy of rational self-interest and those who advocate a foreign policy of suicidal passivism; this leads people to believe that the liberty movement would rather permit enemy regimes to kill Americans and our children than require our government to take out the regimes when doing so might involve killing innocents. And it blurs the distinction between those who recognize the need of objective moral and philosophic principles in defense of liberty and those who deny that need; this leads people to believe that the liberty movement is anti-intellectual and somehow unaware of the fact that liberty is incompatible with today's widely accepted moralities and philosophies. All of this harms the cause of liberty.

If we want to defend liberty, we need to distinguish the ideologies, individuals, and organizations that embrace and uphold the foundations of liberty from those that do not. Classifying by essentials is our means of doing so.

Libertarianism, properly defined, is the ideology that attempts to defend liberty while ignoring or denying the moral and philosophic foundations on which liberty depends. This did not *have* to be the meaning of the word, but it *is* the meaning of the word due to the ideas and actions of those who have shaped libertarianism over the decades. Radical capitalism, on the other hand, is the ideology that aims to defend liberty by identifying and upholding the moral and philosophic foundations on which liberty depends. If we want to defend liberty, we must call things what they are, and we must respectfully point out to those who recognize and uphold the objective philosophic foundations of liberty, yet persist in calling themselves libertarians, that they are harmfully mistaken in doing so.³⁰

It is one thing to recognize the need of an objective philosophic foundation in defense of liberty and yet be uncertain of or even disagree about the particulars of that foundation; it is another thing to deny the need of such a foundation.

If advocates of liberty recognize the need but disagree about the nature of the foundation, then let's have that conversation. That is exactly the conversation we *need* to have. But let's not package those who recognize that need with those who deny it and treat them as though they are essentially the same. They are not. Radical capitalism is one thing; libertarianism is another.

None of this is to say that radical capitalists and libertarians should never engage or work together. It can be perfectly principled for radical capitalists to engage with libertarians, so long as in doing so we do not blur the distinctions between the respective ideologies. If the goal of the engagement is morally legitimate—say, to educate libertarians as to the need of philosophy in defense of liberty, or to encourage people to ask their representatives to support the repeal of a rights-violating law, or the like—and if radical capitalists do not make any concessions to the effect that philosophy is unnecessary in defense of liberty, engaging with libertarians can be profoundly good. (I have twice spoken at Students For Liberty events, where I've discussed the need for a moral and philosophic defense of liberty, and I'll continue speaking to libertarians who are willing to consider such ideas.)

We are engaged in a crucial fight for freedom—freedom to live our own lives and pursue our own happiness in accordance with our own judgment. Our enemies—with their philosophies blazing—aim to kill freedom. Some aim directly to kill *us*. This is not a battle for people who refuse to discuss philosophy. It is a battle for people who *insist* on discussing it.

Embrace philosophy. Discuss philosophy. Be a radical for capitalism.

Endnotes

1. David Boaz, *Libertarianism: A Primer* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), p. 2.
2. For example, see Boaz, *Libertarianism: A Primer*, pp. 62, 74; and Murray N. Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1982), pp. 21–24.
3. For example, see Boaz, *Libertarianism: A Primer*, p. 64; Rothbard, *Ethics of Liberty*, p. 59.
4. For example, see Boaz, *Libertarianism: A Primer*, p. 74; and Murray N. Rothbard, “War, Peace, and the State,” in *Egalitarianism as a Revolt Against Nature, and Other Essays*, 2nd ed. (Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2000), p. 116.
5. For example, see John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979), pp. 7, 11.
6. Quoted in Sidney Hook, *The Paradoxes of Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), p. 8.
7. Auguste Comte, *The Catechism of Positive Religion*, translated by Richard Congreve (London: John Chapman, 1852), pp. 309, 313, 332–33 (emphasis removed).
8. John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001) pp. 42–43. See also, John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 266.
9. Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, p. 89.
10. Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, p. 54; *Justice as Fairness*, pp. 104, 111.
11. Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, p. 54.

12. And if people were persuaded by such unsupported assertions, how effective would they then be as intellectual defenders of liberty?
13. The following streamlined presentation of the conceptual hierarchy underlying the principle of rights is for the purpose of indicating the nature of the hierarchy. It should not be mistaken for anything more than an indication.
14. Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet, 1964); Craig Biddle, “Ayn Rand’s Theory of Rights: The Moral Foundations of a Free Society,” in *The Objective Standard*, Fall 2011.
15. Susan Lee, “Sex, Drugs and Rock ‘n’ Roll,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 2003, <http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,SB1045015523448247263,00.html>.
16. Alexander McCobin, “The Political Principle of Liberty,” in *Why Liberty*, edited by Tom G. Palmer (Ottawa, IL: Jameson, 2013), pp. 47–48.
17. Tom G. Palmer, “The Literature of Liberty,” in *The Libertarian Reader*, edited by David Boaz (New York: The Free Press, 1997), p. 422.
18. From an interview with Harry Brown in *National Review*, September 16, 1996, conducted by Karina Rollins.
19. Rothbard, “War, Peace, and the State,” p. 116.
20. Rothbard, *Ethics of Liberty*, p. 100.
21. Bryan Caplan, “Pacifism in 4 Easy Steps,” *EconLog*, February 17, 2013, http://econlog.econlib.org/archives/2013/02/pacifism_in_4_e.html.
22. Bryan Caplan, “Pacifism Defended,” *EconLog*, April 25, 2011, http://econlog.econlib.org/archives/2011/04/pacifism_defend.html.
23. Bryan Caplan, “Why Libertarians Should Be Pacifists, Not Isolationists,” *EconLog*, March 22, 2010, http://econlog.econlib.org/archives/2010/03/why_libertarian.html.
24. For example, see Murray N. Rothbard, “Defense Services on the Free Market,” in *Power and Market* (Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2006), pp. 1–10; and David Friedman, “Police, Courts, and Laws—on the Market,” in *The Machinery of Freedom*, 2nd ed. (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1989), pp. 114–120.
25. Auberon Herbert, *The Right and Wrong of Compulsion by the State, and Other Essays*, ed. Eric Mack (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1978), pp. 383–84 (paragraphing added).
26. Ayn Rand, *Letters of Ayn Rand*, edited by Michael S. Berliner (New York: Dutton, 1995), pp. 257–58.
27. Rand called herself a “radical for capitalism.” The phrase “radical capitalism” is somewhat redundant, but it is a helpful redundancy as it emphasizes the need to defend freedom by reference to philosophic fundamentals. Other helpful redundancies include “rational egoism,” “individual rights,” and “laissez-faire capitalism.”
28. Unsurprisingly, this fallacy was first identified by Ayn Rand. See Rand, “Philosophical Detection,” in *Philosophy: Who Needs It* (New York: Signet, 1984), p. 22, footnote.
29. This fallacy, too, was first identified by Ayn Rand. See Rand, “How to Read (and Not to Write),” in *The Ayn Rand Letter*, vol. 1, no. 26, September 25, 1972.
30. Prior to Ayn Rand’s discovery and explication of the objective moral and philosophic foundations of liberty, advocates of liberty *couldn’t* ignore or deny those foundations—because the foundations were not known. Today, however, they are known (at least to some extent) by anyone who has read Rand’s or my works on the subject.